Career Management: Towards Constructivist Model

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Abstract: Topicality of the theoretical foundation of career management is determined by the lack of a theoretically substantiated career management model and its practical need for successful contemporary career guidance. The object of the research is an individual career as a meaningful life activity. The subject of the research is career management as a specific form of the activity performed by an individual. The aim of the research is to substantiate a career management model viable in our contemporary society. To achieve the aim concepts of action, learning, competence, career, employability, human capital, mental models, career management and project management were briefly described and analyzed. Contemporary definitions of the terms "career" and "career management" were proposed in the article. The results were presented in the career management model using constructivist approach developed by the author.

Keywords: constructivist approach, employability, human capital, career, career management.

Introduction

Topicality of the theoretical foundation of career management is determined by the lack of a theoretically substantiated model of career management and its practical need for career guidance.

Career theories developed in modern societies were based on the positivistic worldview conceptualizing career as a fixed sequence of unified stages (Super, Super, 1996; Levinson, 1986; Sullivan, 1999) and were built on assumptions of bounded, stable organizations and stability of personal characteristics. In industrial societies career was associated more often with continuous full-time employment in one or several hierarchical, bureaucratic organizations (Haase, 2007), and could be described as a movement in hierarchically structured social space (Сорокин, 1992).

Organizations in postmodern societies are rapidly changing, therefore no matter how stable individual characteristics might be, the need for new theoretical models becomes a matter-of-course. New models have to include concepts of individual and organizational flexibility, personal adaptability and resilience, and they have to put emphasis on life-long learning (Savickas, Nota, 2009). Moreover, unstable and *turbulent career environments require* of individuals *to continually manage changes in themselves and in their contexts* (Fugate, Kinicki, 2004, 15); individuals are encouraged to manage their careers (Savickas, 2011). Recent career theories rooted in the constructivist approach put emphasis on the contexts and cultural diversities and recognize an individual as a designer, constructor and manager of his/her life and career (Guichard, 2009, Savickas, Nota, 2009).

Therefore, the object of the research is an individual career as a meaningful life activity in rapidly changing organizations, economics and societies. The subject of the research is career management as a specific activity carried out by an individual. The aim of the research is to substantiate a career management model viable in our contemporary society. To achieve the aim, several tasks were formulated, the most important ones were as follows: to study the theoretical basis of the career management concept; to identify and analyze characteristics of human activity; to define the concepts "career" and "career management" in rapidly changing societies, as well as to construct an appropriate career management model based on the findings of the research.

The aim of this article is to examine several theories and concepts, to describe career management in contemporary society, as well as to propose an appropriate theoretically well-substantiated career management model.

Methodology

To achieve the aim of the article concepts of action, learning, competence, career, employability, human capital, mental models, career management and project management were briefly described and analyzed. Afterwards career management model using constructivist approach were developed by the author. General scientific methods such as analysis and synthesis, induction, deduction, and analogy were used in the research.

Results and Discussion

We are living in the *era of global business turbulence* (Hall, Chandler, 2007) where the change is the *greatest constant* (Sterman, 1994, 292), and the high level of personal adaptability (*willingness and ability to change personal factors* – knowledge, skills, abilities, dispositions, and other characteristics *to meet the demands of the situation* (Fugate, Kinicki, 2004, 17)) is the most important prerequisite for living in pace with the rapidly changing conditions. Every new situation in life is at least slightly different from the previous one, and individuals constantly have to acquire new knowledge to find the best solutions. Actualization and realization of individual's potential (Rogers, 1959; Maddi, 1968; Bronfenbrenner, Morris, 2006) are inextricably linked to its simultaneous development. In such conditions every situation of individual's life is a situation where new knowledge and skills can be acquired, i.e., situated learning takes place. Learning *occurs through personal reflection, reconstruction and social interaction* and takes place in formal as well as in non-formal or informal settings and is defined as a process *by which an individual assimilates information, ideas and values and thus acquires knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences* (Cedefop, 2011, 99).

Learning is feedback process (Sterman, 1994, 293). Individuals compare information about the state of the real world and their desires, perceive incongruence between the actual and desired states and take all necessary steps to cause the real world to move towards the desired state. More often desired state is reached through subsequent choices and decisions revised on the basis of feedback received. Feedback (*all forms of quantitative and qualitative information from the real world* (Sterman, 1994, 293)) can cause changes not only in decisions and strategies, (single-loop and double-loop learning (Argyris, 2006)), but also involves modification of the underlying structures (triple-loop learning (Sandars, 2006)), i.e., mental models – *deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how* individuals *understand the world and how* they *take action* (Senge, 2006, 8). Such transformative learning (Sandars, 2006) involves new articulations of understandings, leads to reframing of a situation, and promotes development of new goals, strategies and decision rules (Sterman, 1994).

In rapidly changing conditions effective tools for creating, selecting, processing and using the appropriate knowledge to solve problems in all domains of life are required more than fixed knowledge. Therefore, competence (*proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities in work or study situations and in professional and personal development* (Cedefop, 2011, 35-36)) is considered as the most important learning objective.

Competence as a problem-solving potential includes functional (knowledge, skills and abilities necessary for the design and implementation of the appropriate role- and context-specific action), motivational (needs, motives, goals, values, meanings) and reflectional (the ability to reflect on performance, experience, values, knowledge and other resources at different points in time; reflection on the happened (reflection-on-action), ongoing (reflection-in-action) and future activities (reflection-for-action)) components (Argyris, 2006; Schön, 1987; Killion, Todnem, 1991; Cheetham, Chivers, 2005; Каменская, 2009; Mulder, 2011). Competence is *concretized at the moment knowledge is applied* (Reinhardt, North, 2003, 1374) and simultaneously is an outcome of previous learning and a prerequisite for the further development (Bronfenbrenner, Morris, 2006).

To be competent means to show initiative and willingness to adequately handle complex, unpredictable and unprecedented situations; to implement role- and context-specified activities responsibly and ethically based on the mobilization and combination of personal (knowledge, skills, attitudes, experiences, emotions, values and motivation) and external resources to achieve the desired results (e.g., to meet the complex requirements in the particular context (Salganik, Provasnik, 2009));

to cooperate with others and to be able to attract scarce resources; and to learn from the activities carried out (Le Boterf, 2008; 2010). Competence results *in an effective and/or superior performance* (Boyatzis, 1982, 20).

It is evident from the above that career management has to be based on the usage and development of individual's career management competence; career management performance is an expression of career management competence, while the process of career management is the process of career management competence development. Therefore, a career management model also has to be made of the functional, motivational and reflectional components, it has to reflect transformative single-loop, double-loop (reflexive) and triple-loop learning (Argyris, 2006; Sandars, 2006), it has to include processes of personal reflection, reconstruction and social interaction, as well as describe a design and implementation of certain activities. Career management competence can be described as the ability to show initiative and willingness to adequately, responsibly and ethically handle career situations; to mobilize and combine personal and external resources and to use them in the implementation of appropriate activities to achieve the desired results; to cooperate with others and to be able to attract scarce resources; and to learn from experience. Career management competence results in effective and/or superior performance of career management which leads to a successful career.

Nowadays a term "career" is defined more often as *a sequence of job opportunities that goes beyond the boundaries of any single employment setting* (DeFillippi, Arthur, 1996, 116) or broader - as *the totality of work - paid and unpaid - one does in his/her lifetime* (Sears, 1982, 138), the broadest definitions consider career as *life roles at home and in the community, leisure activities, learning and work* (Career Education ..., 2009, 6) or as *interaction* of education, work and privacy (Izglītības likums, 1998). It is argued that everyone regardless of his/her age, gender and employment has a career (Career Education ..., 2009).

Such large concepts are hard to operationalize and measure, as the definitions of life and career become indistinguishable. However, they are not identical; *career is concerned with the productive side of life* (Cochran, 1994, 205). Career has past (available through the memory), present (a composition of meaning that has been lived, is being lived, and will be lived) and future (available from anticipation and imagination) and involves personal representations used in the interpretation and evaluation of the current actions (Cochran, 1994).

During the last century, a notion of career was associated more often with continuous full-time employment. Researchers *must now focus attention on employability rather than employment*; in rapidly changing labour markets *individuals cannot maintain their employment, so they must maintain their employability and actively manage their careers* (Savickas, 2011, 251, 253). Employability is a *synergistic combination of career identity, personal adaptability* (described above), *and social and human capital* (Fugate, Kinicki, 2004, 18), which *enable individuals to (...) progress during their careers* (Cedefop, 2011, 52).

A term "career identity" is defined as individual's *self-definition in the career context*, *describing "who I am" or "who I want to be"* (Fugate, Kinicki, 2004, 18), more or less coherent cognitive-affective representations of diverse and diffuse career experiences and aspirations, assimilated into meaningful or useful structures. Career identity *may include goals, hopes, and fears; personality traits; values, beliefs, and norms; interaction styles; time horizons; and so on*, and operate as a basis for making sense of past and present and giving a direction to future (Fugate, Kinicki, 2004, 20). Such an understanding of career identity puts an emphasis on the leading position of career identity in the synergistic combination of employability. Driven by aspirations, career identity acts as a *cognitive compass that motivates individual* to actively realize or create career opportunities (Fugate, Kinicki, 2004, 17). Therefore, career identity may be recognized as a mental model – individual *understanding of the causal structure of the* [career] *system*, *the boundary* individuals *draw around the system*, *the time horizon* they *consider relevant, or* their *goals and values* (Sterman, 1994, 294); career identity serves as an underlying structure for elaboration of career strategies and decisions (career designing), as well as is a basis for career interpretation and evaluation. Career identity is one of the self-constructed and continuously reconstructed *cognitive structures in long term memory* that allows individuals *to organize conceptions and construct themselves* (Guichard, 2006, 8).

Several researchers describe similar structures; personal career theory (Holland, 1997), subjective career (Savickas, 2002), working identities (Ibarra, 2003), subjective identity forms (Guichard, Pouyaud, 2012) are mentioned as the most important structures of career management. It could be concluded that the ability to design, implement, interpret and evaluate one's own career (briefly: to manage one's own career) depends on the quality of these structures and their usage. Career realization can be separated from career management; in some cases an individual may be only an *implementer* (not a *manager*) of his/her career. If his/her career management structures (e.g., career identity) are not sufficient for satisfactory independent career management (and consequently his/her career management competence is insufficient), he/she can fully or partially rely on external career management (career designing, interpretation and evaluation) provided by an employer, a parent, a peer or someone else.

Individuals and organizations *make investments in social and human capital* and *anticipate of future returns in the workplace* (Fugate, Kinicki, 2004, 23). A term "social capital" is defined as *the goodwill* (information and influence) *inherent in social networks*, which extends individual's ability to find, identify (or create) and realize career opportunities (Fugate, Kinicki, 2004, 24). Human capital represents individual's ability to meet the performance expectations in the labour market or in non-market activities (Laroche, Mérette, 1999; Fugate, Kinicki, 2004), and is defined *as the aggregation of the innate abilities and the knowledge and skills that individuals acquire and develop throughout their lifetime* (Laroche, Mérette, 1999, 89), and *use to produce goods, services or ideas in market or non-market circumstances* (Miller, 1996, 22). Human capital promotes *personal, social and economic wellbeing* (Cedefop, 2011, 82).

Anticipated return from human capital in the workplace or in non-market activities is obtainable only if human capital is used, so the contemporary career definitions have to be based on the notion of the usage of human capital. In continuously changing conditions the usage of human capital is inextricably linked to its simultaneous development. Career is also a learning activity resulting in enrichment of human potential over the lifetime (Peruniak, 2010, 8). Therefore, career can be broadly defined as the usage and development of human capital in the labour market or in non-market activities. The definition can be applied to all domains of life (such as leisure activities, learning and work) where human capital is used and developed in a wide range of roles at home and in the community. Personal adaptability, career identity and social capital are essential prerequisites for the usage and development of human capital, therefore, individuals can realize their careers *independently* but not in *isolation*; personal adaptability and social networking can not be realised and developed outside the society. The usage and development of human capital depend on individual's needs and motivation, values, interests and preferences, as well as is conditional upon opportunities offered by the society (Синицкая, 2006). Therefore, the society (social environment) has to be considered as a necessary prerequisite of career and has to be included in the contemporary model of career management.

Career as an action implicates goals, means, plans, and choices (Cochran, 1994). According to activity theory developed by Aleksei Leontiev (Леонтьев, 1975), the central level of the activity is constituted by hierarchically subordinated actions. Activities, excited by needs, *are driven by motives, are performed through certain actions which are directed at goals and which, in turn, are implemented through certain operations* (conscious or automatic actions, which do not have their own goals) (Kaptelinin, Kuutti, 1995, 193), particular activities-in-life are the units of the whole systemic life-activity (Карпинский, 2002). Dmitry Leontiev (2005, 63) argues that *intentional aspect of activity is determined by the meaning-based content that permeates to all levels of activity*; meaning-based structures of personality consist of motives, personal meanings, meaning-based sets, meaning-based constructs and dispositions, and personal values. It is evident from the above that career as a unit of life-activity is restricted by life-activity caused by personal needs, determined (facilitated or obstructed) by meaning-based structures of personality, directed at certain goals and can be carried out through specific intentionally chosen, planned actions and operations. According to the Life System Framework, an individual activity consists of *coherent "chunks" of context-specific, goal-directed activity (behaviour episodes)* (Patton, McMahon, 2014, 221).

A concept of career involves temporal organization; career is experienced over the extended period of time (Cochran, 1994). In rapidly changing conditions, a project is the most appropriate form of temporal organization of productive (non-replicative) activity (Новиков, 2010). A project is a *temporary endeavour undertaken to create unique product, service or result* (Harrington, McNellis, 2006, xxiv). It follows that career consists of the coherent relatively unrelated career projects. Un-relatedness is relative because every career project (a project of using and developing human capital) is implemented through competences created and developed during the previous career projects and at the same time facilitates development of the same competences. Relatively separated career projects are connected through competence development. As career is a unit of life-activity, career management must be subordinated to life management, inseparably linked to management of other life activities and can be understood as management of career projects.

According to H. James Harrington's project management definition (Harrington, McNellis, 2006, 1), career management can be defined as the application and development of career management competence for the usage and development of human capital in the labour market or in non-market activities *to meet or exceed stakeholder needs and expectations from a project*. Individuals and organizations which *make investments in human capital* and *anticipate of future returns in the workplace* (Fugate, Kinicki, 2004, 23) or in *non-market activities* (Laroche, Mérette, 1999) can be considered as stakeholders in the career projects; a notion of stakeholders has to include individuals (e.g., a career manager himself/herself, his/her peers or family members separately) as well as the small (e.g., family, peer groups) and large groups (e.g., organizations, communities) of society; successful career meets (or exceeds) not only the needs and expectations of an individual but also those of society from the individual's career projects. Moreover, career as a learning activity is based on feedback (Sterman, 1994). It could be concluded that the needs and expectations of society as well as its investments and support (e.g., feedback and guidance) given by individuals, groups and organizations have to be included in the career management model. At the same time, every individual as a member of society has his/her own needs and expectations related to careers of other individuals and can make investments in their human capital, give feedback to others and support them.

Based on the project concept proposed by Alexandr Novikov (Новиков, 2010), it can be seen that a career project consists of career designing, implementation and evaluation. Career designing should be considered as a part of life designing (Savickas, Nota, 2009). Life and/or career designing can include but is not limited to formulation of inconsistencies and problems, goal setting and selection of criteria, development and optimization of the models, selection of the most appropriate model for realization (decision-making), examination of the conditions and resources, developing of a strategy (plan) through decomposition and aggregation, as well as technological preparation for *implementation*. Career designing results in a career *strategy - perspective, direction, and guidelines on what to do and how to do it* (Shenhar, 2004, 572). *Evaluation* can be described as a reflection on the processes and results of life and/or career, result assessment (including feedback from society) and decision-making about the activity adjustment or launch of a new project. A career project as a learning activity consists of realization of the career strategies derived from the prevailed mental models, feedback on realization, and evaluation of the career project which *cause changes in* decisions, strategies and *mental models* (Sterman, 1994, 296).

The linear *Plan-and-Implement Model* and the cyclic *Test-and-Learn Model* are juxtaposed as two diametrically opposed models in the Working Identity conception developed by Herminia Ibarra (2003, 34). Taken separately, the models describe career changes only partly because career changes can be triggered by pains and problems, as well as by future possibilities, simultaneously a starting point may be either exterior or interior in both cases, etc. Therefore, it is evident from the above that an effective career management model can be created through synthesis of both models in an ongoing cyclical *Plan-and-Implement-and-Test-and-Learn* model. A career management process includes existent (problems, pain, and dissatisfaction) and prospective (future possibilities) triggers. The exterior and interior starting points (changes in the mind-sets as well as changes in actions; reflections, analysis and doing) may be linear with a fixed end goal within a single episode and at the same time a circular process in which *iterative rounds of action and reflection lead to updating goals and possibilities* (Ibarra, 2003, 34) within a wider time frame. Circular processes are based on the changing

end goals related to the ongoing improvement of the individual ability to formulate and test assumptions about the future possibilities. Therefore, career projects are deductive and inductive, explicit and implicit knowledge on personality and career which is applied and continuously created during the career projects.

Testing of the career models is an important part of career designing. Real-life activity is not the only way to test viability of the career models. Individuals also *can conduct experiments, and play* in virtual worlds, *low-cost laboratories* for controlled experimentation where actions can be carried out repeatedly in the same or different conditions. Virtual worlds *allow time and space to be compressed and dilated*, give an opportunity to stop the action to reflect, as well as allow to make decisions that are unsuitable (dangerous, infeasible, unethical) in the real world and to test possible consequences (Sterman, 1994, 309). Thus, it is evident from the said that career management *involves continuous experimentation in both the virtual world and real world*, receiving feedback from both, development of the mental models on the basis of interpretation and assessment of received information, and *design of experiments for the next iteration* (Sterman, 1994, 310). Career roles can be enacted in *fantasy,* communication (e.g., *in the counselling interview*) *or in real life activities, such as hobbies, classes, clubs, part-time work, and entry jobs* (Savickas, 2002, 156).
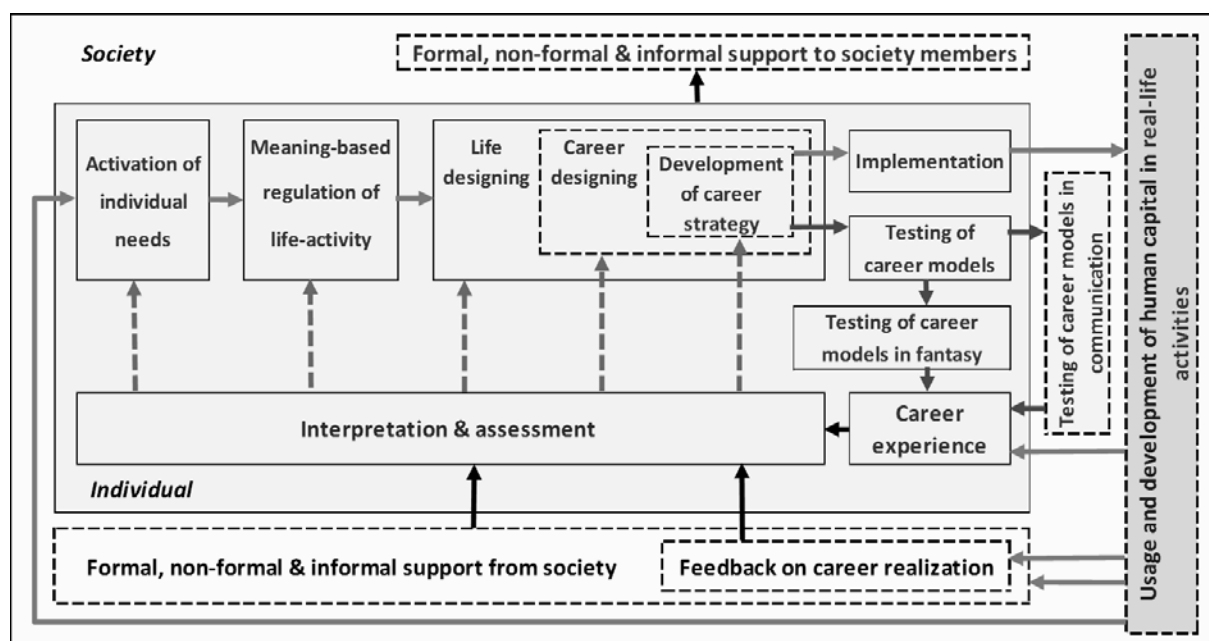

Figure 1. Career Management Cycle: Constructivist Model (Author's construct).

The career management cycle model developed by the author (Figure1) is based on the application and development of career management competence using constructivist approach and consists of activation of individual needs, meaning-based regulation of life-activity (and career as a subsystem of life-activity), life designing (incl., career designing as a subsystem of life designing), development of the career strategy and successive testing of the career strategy models in fantasy and/or communication, and/or implementation of the career strategy in real life activities. Meaning-based regulation of life-activity is based on the meaning-based structures of personality, and depends on the quality of those structures. Life and career designing is based on the mental models of life and career (subjective identity forms, career identity, personal career theory, etc.) and consists of goal-setting, career modelling, testing and optimization of the career models, selection of the most appropriate model for realization, examination of the conditions and resources. Career management is a *circular process* with *iterative rounds of action, reflection and updating of goals* (Ibarra, 2003, 34), therefore incomplete career designs (career strategies) can be immediately tested in fantasy or in the communication process, as well as (if one has such an opportunity) in real-life activities, evaluated and further improved in the processes of life/career designing.

Testing of the career models in communication and their realization in real-life activities constitute career experience as well as make changes in society (dashed lines). Realization in real-life activities

also promotes changes in the system of individual needs, and has an influence on formal, non-formal and informal support (e.g., career guidance, investments in human capital) from society, as well as serves as a basis for external feedback on the process and results of individual's career.

The constructivist model of learning is based on the interpretation of experience, individuals *interpret it, organize it, and infer about it with the cognitive structures they have previously constructed* (Fosnot, 2005), therefore interpretation and assessment of career experience are in the centre of the model. Individuals interpret and assess their career experience, feedback and support received from society. Interpretation and assessment lead (dashed lines) to assimilation of new experience in the underlying mental structures (not showed) or to accommodation of the given structures (Piaget, 1985). Interpretation and assessment lead to the changes in the meaning-based structures of personality (triple-loop learning), mental models of life and career (e.g., career identity) (double-loop learning), as well as in the career strategies (single-loop learning) and can influence the system of individual needs. Thus, realized cycles of career management lead to the progressive development of the ability *to hold and use mental images*, which allow individuals to *formulate* better their *values, beliefs, goals, and strategies* (Fosnot, 2005) and is an important prerequisite for the further development of career management competence.

Conclusions

The career management model developed by the author is based on the constructivist approach and includes assumptions created on the basis of several theories such as career, learning, activity and project management theory. Career management in contemporary, rapidly changing labour markets and societies can be considered as a learning process, which is focused on development and maintaining of employability – synergistic combination of career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital. Career management is a process where career management competence is used and developed and can be described as career project management. Career management competence can be described as the ability to handle career situations; to mobilize and combine personal and external resources and to use them in the implementation of appropriate activities to achieve the desired results; to cooperate with others and to be able to attract scarce resources; and to learn from experience. Career can be broadly defined as the usage and development of human capital in the labour market or in non-market activities. Successful career meets (or exceeds) not only personal needs and expectations but also those of society from individual's career projects.

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