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Explaining Company-level Influences on Individual Career Choices: Evidence from Belgium**

In the current career reality people not only make traditional career transitions such as entry into and exit from the labor market or upward in-company mobility, but also horizontal movements and transitions between employment and different social spheres such as household, care and leisure time. This broad perspective on career mobility that takes into account both traditional and new kinds of career steps is an important yet understudied area. Regarding the influences of making or not making a career transition, research has limited itself to individuals shaping their own career (i.e. micro level). Little research has examined the influence that organizations may exercise on the individual's career decision making process by means of their policies and practices (i.e. meso level). Drawing on Schmid's model of a transitional labor market (1998), this qualitative empirical research explores the factors at company level that individuals point to as obstructing or facilitating their career transitions. Results show that organizational policies and practices do play an important role in the individual's career trajectory as to whether or not he or she decides to undertake a transition. Implications for practitioners and policy makers are discussed.

Key words: Career, Transitions, Labor Market, Belgium

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Introduction

Contemporary careers are defined as the individually perceived sequence of attitudes and behaviors associated with work-related experiences and activities over the span of the person's life (Hall 2002). These experiences are both on-the-job experiences as well as experiences related to transitions within and between organizations. While traditional career models focused on a limited type of transitions – entry into the labor market, followed by 30 or 40 years of full-time employment and upward mobility in a limited number of organizations, ending with retirement around the age of 65 – the current career reality has become more complex (Baruch 2003; Hall/Moss 1998). With a growing emphasis on international competitiveness and organizational flexibility, employees are said that they should be more flexible and adaptive with regard to their career development (Hall/Moss 1998). This has led to a greater awareness of the need to consider career transitions made during employment and to seek ways to promote career development even in the context of organizational change (Baruch 2003; Eby et al. 2005). Following this changing nature of careers, innovative concepts have emerged in management literature, such as the 'boundaryless career' (Arthur/Rousseau 1996), the 'protean career' (Hall 1996) and the 'post-corporate career' (Peiperl/Baruch 1997), which all reflect this shift from traditional towards transitional careers (Eby et al. 2005). Thus, a more complete view on career development requires to take into account not only the transitions of entry into and exit from the labor market, and the upward in company transitions made during this period, but also to include other types of transitions made such as horizontal movements and transitions between employment and different social spheres such as household, care and leisure time. Therefore, in this paper we address the broader range of career transitions that employees can make during their 'career lifecycle' and investigate the influences that are decisive for making or not making these transitions.

Ozbilgin et al. (2004) introduce three levels of analysis to study influences on career transitions: the micro, meso and macro level. The new career literature gives precedence to the micro level and focuses on individuals shaping their own career. But while this literature starts from the assumption that firms no longer cause careers, research has shown that external clues continue to mark the shape of a career (Dany 2003). Individual agency cannot be considered in isolation from contextual factors at the meso level such as company related influences (Ozbilgin et al. 2004), since the organization constitutes the middle ground where careers are played out. Prior research has reported both influences at the micro and meso level of analysis as a key influence on career choices (Kyriacou et al. 2002; Ozbilgin et al. 2004). In addition, the career outlining process is considered to be a shared responsibility of both individuals and their employers (Orpen 1994; Sturges et al. 2000). However, little research has examined the influence that organizations may exercise on the individual's career decision making process by means of their policies and practices. Yet the latter can play an important role in the individual's career trajectory as to whether or not he or she decides to undertake a transition. In particular, company-related factors can stimulate or hinder career transitions between jobs or between employment on the one hand and

other social spheres like education, activities in private households and other forms of non-professional activity on the other (Buyens/Wouters 2001; De Vos et al. 2006).

For this reason, it is the objective of this study to investigate which factors at company level underlie the individuals' decision making process when making or not making a career transition. More specifically, we seek to generate a list of determinants at the company level that aid or restrict the process of outlining a career path by subjecting company-related factors to the opinion of the individual employees involved. Furthermore, in view of the current activation debate, gaining more insight into the issue of job and labor market mobility is not only interesting from a scientific point of view, but also highly relevant both for HR professionals and labor market policy makers. Insight into the factors that prevent individuals from moving between different labor market positions, and those which have a stimulating effect, is an important precondition for the implementation of effective policy measures.

Using a qualitative approach, this study sets out to examine how companies through their human resource practices can influence people when outlining their career. It will do this through the following research questions: (a) To what extent is company policy (in the widest sense) decisive for people's choices regarding mobility? and (b) which factors at company level do the persons concerned point to as obstructing or facilitating career choices?

We begin by drawing a picture of mobility on the Belgian labor market. Next we amplify on the model this study draws on, i.e. Schmid's model of a transitional labor market (1998). Data gathered from focus groups are then used to uncover meso-organizational determinants of individuals' career choices. Finally we discuss implications for practitioners as well as for labor market policy makers and we formulate suggestions for future research.

Careers on the Belgian labor market

Before we turn to an analysis of the company-level factors that affect employees' career transitions, we briefly summarize some empirical data about career transitions as they currently occur on the Belgian labor market, i.e. the context in which our study took place. A description of the occurrence of different types of career transitions is important to understand our findings about their company-level antecedents as outlined further in this paper. Empirical data on the occurrence of career transitions show a dominant presence of traditional permanent employment patterns on the Belgian labor market (Forrier et al. 2004; Heylen et al. 2005). Heylen et al. (2005) found that almost half of the respondents in their analysis on the Panel Study of Belgian Households (PSBH) did not undertake any career transition at all during the reference period 1992-2000. Almost half of this group worked in full-time employment. Still, one in five respondents make three or more transitions during the 1992-2000 period. But although the less traditional career transitions (e.g. job hopping, part-time work etc.) make up a larger group within these rather dynamic careers, it is remarkable that even in the latter, full-time employment occupies a central space.

However, the dominance of traditional career patterns on the Belgian labor market does not mean that these kinds of traditional career steps always occur in a smooth way. As to the entry transition into the labor market, Heylen et al. (2005)

found that out of 8,8% of entering students in the PSBH-database, only 3% makes a smooth transition into the labor market. 1,5% is faced with difficulties at the moment of entry into the labor market, 2,8% enters in a ‘jobhopping’ way and 1,5% goes back to study. The exit transition for its part, is even more problematic. The majority of people in Belgium tend to retire at last at the age of 58, whereas in the future people will have to work longer. This implies that the elderly in Belgium will have to be encouraged to work longer but the PSBH-data, showing that only 1,1% of retiring persons continues some kind of professional activity after retirement, indicate that this will be a tough task.

In short, the establishment of a ‘transitional labor market’ requires both the will on behalf of individuals and the means on behalf of organizations to make and respectively facilitate career transitions. With regard to the first aspect, Bollen et al. (2006) found that the average Belgian worker doesn’t make much effort when it comes to managing his or her own career. Belgians continue to think in terms of a traditional career and are only concerned about employability with their current employer (Verbruggen et al. 2005; Bollen et al. 2006). The question is however, whether such behaviour is caused either by micro-individual or by meso-organizational influences. Do organizations for example insufficiently support their employees in making career transitions or do they constitute considerable hindrances to making transitions, so that individuals refrain from taking initiative? This study sets out to investigate this role of meso-organizational influences in the career decision-making process of individuals and how this determines the degree of flexibility of the Belgian labor market.

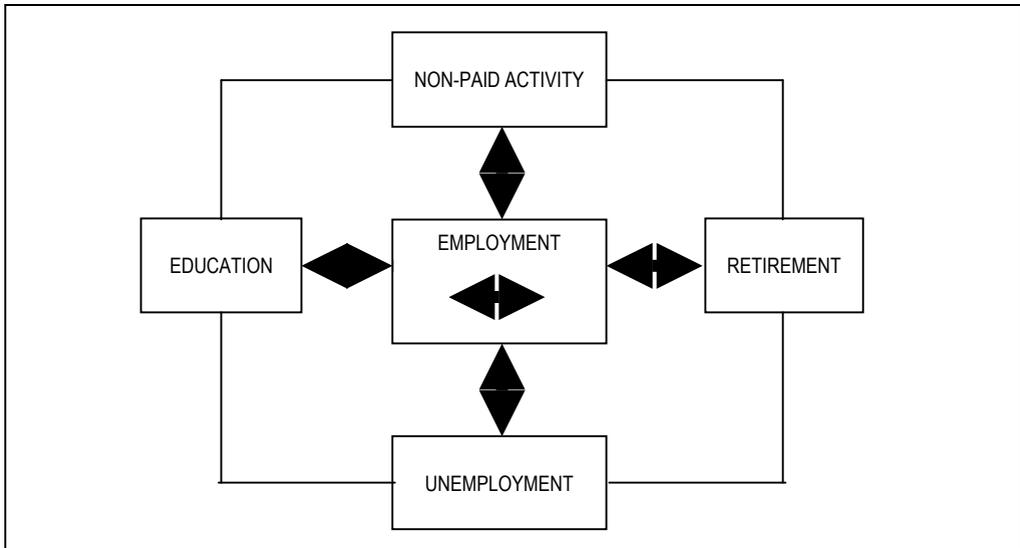
The transitional model of Schmid

The transitional labor market theory of Günther Schmid (1998) constitutes a dynamic framework to explore the ways in which organizational mechanisms can facilitate or hinder career transitions. Schmid (1998) puts forward five possible positions on the labor market, between which career transitions can take place: employment, unemployment, education, non-paid activity and retirement (see Figure 1). Thus five types of transitions are possible that reflect labor market mobility: (1) the transition between education and employment, (2) between non-paid activities and employment, (3) between unemployment and employment, (4) from employment to retirement and (5) job mobility i.e. all kinds of transitions inside the employment-box (transitions between various working time regimes or various working locations, transitions to a different organization, to a different sector...).

Schmid (1998) recognizes that the concept of transition in itself is not a ‘new’ phenomenon on the labor market, but draws the attention to the hard conditions under which these transitions often take place in reality, as for example the entry into the labor market by young graduates, as pointed out earlier. For this reason Schmid (1998) argues that the borders between the labor market and other social systems have to become more open for transitory states between paid work and gainful non-market activities which preserve and enhance future employability. In other words, company policy should encourage individuals to find the ideal combination between paid work, care, education and leisure time in accordance with their individual life cycle (Schmid 1998).

Figure 1: Labor market policy as a strategy of transitional labor markets

(Source: Schmid 1998)



While Schmid's theory in the first place concerns a normative framework specifying a potential labor market model, at the same time it has a clear analytical component. It obliges researchers to investigate careers and labor markets from a broad and dynamic perspective. It is from this point of view that this theory is applied in this study. We will elaborate separately on each of the transitions.

Method

Data gathered from focus groups were used to achieve our goal of exploring which company-level factors individuals point to as obstructing or facilitating the particular career transition they are involved in. A total of 111 individuals took part in 11 focus groups. We have two reasons for using a qualitative research design. First, there is the complexity of the research theme. The individual decision-making process when tracing a career path and the factors influencing the decision cannot be captured by means of quantitative survey research (Hutjes/van Buuren 1992). The qualitative form of research is, on the contrary, extremely suitable for the in-depth collection of data on the many aspects that could play a role, with the ultimate aim being to have a grasp of the total picture of individual reflections and perceptions. Second, the emphasis on reliability (unambiguousness, replicability) in quantitative research is at the expense of validity (richness, depth and relevance) of the results (Hutjes/van Buuren 1992). In-depth exploration with and collection of information from the subjects themselves therefore again militates for qualitative research.

Access to the data

Research into behaviour is often based on a significant degree of non-representative samples that are compiled on the basis of the researcher's judgment (Fern 2001). Furthermore, in qualitative research, the importance of external validity or the extent to

which the results of the research can be generalised is subordinate to the necessity of understanding and the in-depth analysis (Gosselin 2002). This justifies our choice to recruit from a selective number of sources, so-called ‘purposive sampling’ (Glaser/ Strauss 1967; Patton 1990), when recruiting focus group participants. Our priority was to find participants who fulfilled the required profile for the specific focus groups to enable a wide-ranging and in-depth study of individual perceptions. Recruitment of focus group participants occurred on the one hand on an individual basis and on the other in co-operation with organizations. A target group of employees was defined within the organizations in consultation with the persons in charge, on the basis of the sought-after profile. Table 1 gives an overview of the profile of the focus group participants, which is based on the career typology of Heylen et al. (2005), and the procedure followed to recruit participants.

Table 1: Focus groups details

| | Subject profile | Number of participants | Individual | In co-operation with an organization | Total number of focus groups |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------|------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Education – employment | - University graduates | 10 | x | | 1 |
| | - Technical school graduates | 8 | x | | 1 |
| Non-paid activity – employment | - White collar workers | 13 | x | x | 1 |
| | - Executives | 12 | x | x | 1 |
| Within employment | - White collar workers/ executives | 9+6 | x | | 2 |
| Unemployment – employment | - Blue collar workers | 11 | | x | 1 |
| | - White collar workers/ executives | 9 | | x | 1 |
| Employment – retirement | - Blue collar/white collar workers | 9 | | x | 1 |
| | - Executives | 9+15 | x | x | 2 |
| | Total | 111 | | | 11 |

Organization of focus groups

The concrete implementation of the focus groups was based on the available literature regarding focus group research (Fern 2001; Greenbaum 2000; Krueger/Casey 2000). Two to three focus groups were organized per research topic, taking into account the saturation principle (Glaser/ Strauss 1967; Morgan 1997). On average some 10 persons were brought around the table in the focus groups so that they could give their own opinions and experiences and go into greater depth about a number of statements that were put forward (Krueger/Casey 2000). In order to limit possible influences such as group conformity and social desirability, we implemented an element of the Delphi technique (Hellendoorn 1998). The set of questions was specifically developed in relation to the qualitative purpose of the research and consisted of open questions repre-

senting research questions. Before starting the discussion about these questions, participants were asked to write down their individual views. In line with the literature on 'best practices' for organising focus groups, use was made of the 'funnelling approach' (Krueger/Casey 2000). The focus groups were started with more general questions to get the discussion going and then gradually went over to more specific questions, explicitly related to the transition being researched.

Facilitating and obstructive influences at company level

A summary of key findings with regard to facilitating and obstructing factors at the company level for each transition is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Overview of career facilitating and obstructing factors at company level

| | Facilitating determinants | Obstructing determinants |
|--|--|--|
| Transition from education to employment | <p>Recruitment policies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recruitment channels: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ E-tools: accessibility, abundance of information ▪ Informal channels: personal contacts ▪ In-house trainings, holiday or weekend work: important intermediary for linking up with labor market (mainly technical college graduates) - Selection tools: personal discussion | <p>Recruitment policies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recruitment channels: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ E-tools: badly organized, lack of navigational tools, very time intensive ▪ In-house trainings: not always recognised as profound practical experience (mainly for university graduates) - Unclear use of language in vacancies (job title, function description, profile requirements) - Selection criterion: requirement of practical experience - Selection tools: intelligence tests, psychological tests... - Communication: lack of response and feedback (mainly for university graduates) |
| Transitions within employment | <p>Internal job mobility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Vertical</i> mobility: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Developed career system ▪ Involvement of employee in succession planning ▪ Individual career guidance from immediate superior ▪ Communication: need for clear communication concerning career possibilities - <i>Horizontal</i> mobility: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lateral development possibilities: need for zigzag movement as an alternative to vertical growth ▪ Insight into employee's competences: necessary for optimal match <p>External job mobility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mature approach both on behalf of employer and employee | <p>Internal job mobility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Vertical</i> mobility: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of a well thought out career policy, ad hoc approach ▪ No freedom of choice ▪ Shortcomings of the immediate superior in role of career counsellor ▪ Communication: lack of transparency in practice ▪ Organizational structure ▪ Diploma criteria - <i>Horizontal</i> mobility: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of possibility to move between departments ▪ Management resistance to cross-departmental moves ▪ Lack of insight into competences on behalf of the immediate superior ▪ Lack of insight into competencies on behalf of employee <p>External job mobility</p> |

| | Facilitating determinants | Obstructing determinants |
|---|--|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Open communication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'Taboo' about leaving a company - Difficulty of exit interviews |
| Transitions between employment and non-paid activity | <p>Work organization:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Result oriented culture: self-discipline instead of monitoring by superior <p>Provisions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Appreciated but considered less necessary than working time/leave regulations and work organization | <p>Working time and leave regulations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promotion policy: reduction of advancement opportunities - Pressure of work: non-reduction of work load - Communication and co-ordination: less contact and synchronous attendances - Redistribution: extra work load for colleagues <p>Work organization:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Technological support: high investment costs - Communication: less contact |
| Transition from unemployment to employment | <p>Recruitment policies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recruitment channels: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ E-tools: accessibility, abundance of information ▪ Informal channels: personal contacts <p>In-house trainings (mainly blue collar workers)</p> <p>Outplacement</p> | <p>Recruitment policies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recruitment channels: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ E-tools: vacancies mainly available to young workers with some practical experience ▪ Recruitment and selection bureaux: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ White collar workers/executives: quality of service offered and ethics ○ Blue collar workers: required mobility, last-minute contact - Communication: lack of response and feedback - Selection criteria: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ White collar workers/executives: financially, age, overqualification ▪ Blue collar workers: discrimination on basis of appearance, perception practical experience ≠ asset <p>Short-term contracts: negative perception due to financial aspect, uncertainty, age, status, no bond with the job/employer</p> |
| Transition from employment to retirement | <p>Employability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training: executives: importance of constantly keeping professional knowledge up to date - Mentorship: knowledge transfer and recognition <p>Well-being at work and quality of work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Adjustments to the function-content/working time scheme <p>Exit jobs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Positive perception of usefulness | <p>Balanced age pyramid</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age as a selection or redundancy criterion - Valuing older employees: prejudices <p>Employability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training: blue collar workers: questions if necessary and useful - Mentorship: organizational problems (no one to give follow-up, follow-up too late, etc.) <p>Well-being at work and quality of work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Change in job content <p>Exit jobs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Practical and organizational obstructions |

The transition from education to employment

As pointed out earlier, the transition from school to work is traditionally the first career step employees undertake, and it is often – at least in the Belgian labor market context – a problematic one. A lot of the conditions under which young graduates enter the labor market, are shaped by the employers' recruitment policies (e.g. recruitment channels, job advertisements, selection criteria and tools) (Taylor/Bergmann 1987; Gorter et al. 1993). We asked graduates about their opinion on these elements in the context of their transition from school to work.

Selection criteria

First, our focus groups revealed that – contrary to popular belief – even respondents with a master degree may experience a hard time in getting a job. Extensive theoretical knowledge is no longer the ultimate asset to impress the recruiter as organizations seem to attach a bigger value to work experience: “It is hard to find a job when you graduate because you have to compete against people with some work experience”. Hence young graduate respondents perceived the selection criterion of work experience as one of the biggest hindrances for getting a job (Gorter et al. 1993). Respondents with a technical degree on the other hand, felt very optimistic about their employment opportunities. They reported to suffer more from society's undervaluation of their educational qualification, forcing them into choices that do not match their capacities.

Advertising channels

According to our respondents, both recruiters and job seekers increasingly make use of electronic information and communication channels. Research on this trend is still in its early stages (Bartram 2000; Lievens et al. 2002; Anderson 2003). To complete prior studies that compared advertisement through the internet to advertisement through traditional channels (Rozelle/Landis 2003), our results give insight into how job seekers with different educational qualifications evaluate E-recruitment and its tools. Respondents with a master degree stated that given the abundance of advertisement channels – without detracting from the ease of finding information on vacancies thanks to E-tools – there is a risk of overloading job seekers with information in such a way that they find it impossible to assimilate the data. The respondents with a technical qualification hadn't found their way to E-tools yet, and reported to look for jobs mainly via informal channels such as personal contacts, acquaintances or family. As their most important requirement with regard to a job appeared to be proximity to their home, they considered the lack of information about employment opportunities with local employers as an obstructing element.

Job advertisements

The degree of specificity of the information provided to job seekers is an important characteristic of job advertisements (Breugh/Starke 2000). In our research, job advertisements were not judged to be completely accurate. According to all young graduates, job titles or function descriptions can be very unclear and misleading. Moreover, they indicated that they did not always completely understand what the function incorporates and consequently ignore whether this is something they would

like to do or not. This lack of information results in many graduates wasting their time in applying for a job which later turns out to be the complete opposite of what they are looking for. Another criticism of job advertisements is that profile requirements are sometimes stated very generally. For example, what is meant by 'flexibility' or 'work experience is a plus'? Does this second requirement exclude young graduates or not? As a result job seeking graduates cannot accurately ascertain what companies mean by these terms.

Selection tools

In terms of studying the reactions of applicants to selection tools, a significant body of knowledge has investigated this issue either from a psychometric/economic (Macan et al. 1994) or from a marketing perspective (Ryan/Ployhart 2000; Anderson 2003; Bauer et al. 2004). Whereas these studies have helped to develop a clear understanding of the psychometric soundness and validity of tests or the utility of selection procedures on the one hand (Gilliland 1993), and applicants' perceptions in view of company attractiveness and job acceptance on the other (Macan et al. 1994; Powell/Goulet 1996), they do not give clear explanations as to how these selection procedures influence the applicants' transition from school to work. Our research bridges this gap. The respondents from our focus groups perceived all kinds of selection tests like analytical tests, psychological tests, tests of presentation and negotiation skills etc. as a considerable stumble block to their entry into the labor market for several reasons. For example, some respondents believed that these tests gave a completely distorted view of the candidate. Given the often stressful conditions under which these tests have to be taken, the results may not give a correct indication of the candidate's ability and motivation. Furthermore, our respondents critically evaluated the consistency and reliability of these tests. One student commented: 'in some companies you fail the tests, in others you pass and you don't know why'. Even though we need to nuance these remarks from the point of view of non-hired candidates, the issue that respondents make of it, indicates the importance of this practice as an obstructing factor to a smooth transition from school to work. Participants also raised the problem of a lack of possibilities to practice for this type of assessments, as well as a lack of feedback about their results afterwards.

Contrary to selection tests, selection interviews were evaluated rather positively. Respondents viewed the personal contact as a good means to illustrate their motivation and profile. Nevertheless, in a one-to-one interview, only one person decides upon the fit of the candidate with the job. To overcome this kind of subjective selection, our respondents preferred panel interviews.

To conclude on this first transition, results clearly show a difference in perception regarding the ease or of entry into the labor market between respondents with a master degree and those with a technical qualification. Whereas the former report a negative attitude towards the process of looking for and finding a job when evaluating their transition from school to work, the latter group do not report a negative approach towards finding the connection with the labor market in itself, but rather towards the general recognition of their qualification in society. Hence, technically skilled graduates do not blame the recruiting company as the first cause for not find-

ing a good job (“the application process mainly concerns an ‘easy chat’”), but the current hierarchy in the Belgian educational system.

Transitions between jobs on the internal or external labor market

Secondly, our research dealt with career transitions made during employment, and more specifically those that relate to internal (e.g. transition to another job or department) and external (transition to another organization) mobility. This type of transitions is gaining more importance in the career literature as the interest in new career concepts such as the “boundaryless career” (Arthur/Rousseau 1996; Arthur et al. 2005) or the “protean career” (Hall 1996) increases. While job mobility in traditional careers mainly included upward mobility within the internal labor market, in contemporary careers it encompasses diverse types of mobility both on the internal and external labor market. In addition to the traditional vertical movements, lateral and temporary movements and movements ‘in place’ through job enrichment are increasingly considered as valued career transitions on the internal labor market, and frequent change of employer becoming more common as a result of the increasing emphasis on the responsibility of the individual employee for his or her own career management (De Vos et al. 2006). But, as outlined before, on the Belgian labor market only a limited proportion of the workforce reports making those types of transitions that can be viewed as indicators of the “new career”. In this paragraph we describe factors at company level that might explain this finding.

The importance of company support for career moves

All respondents in our focus groups agreed upon the fact that having the opportunity to make a career move within the organization – either in a vertical (promotion) or a horizontal (development) way – was extremely important. However, we observed substantial differences in the extent to which organizations have successfully implemented career management practices that support their employees’ career development. We could categorize our respondents into three groups depending on the extent to which career management practices supported transitions on the internal labor market. A first category of respondents belonged to organizations that lack any kind of policy that helps to detect and support employees’ career aspirations and that left it up completely to the employee to take any initiative regarding his or her career. This category appears to cover most of the smaller organizations represented in the focus groups, as one person said: “I am working in a family company where career support is not an issue. You have to do it yourself. In bigger companies there are more possibilities in terms of advancement and counseling”. A second category belonged to organizations that appear to have an excellent career management system worked out on paper, but that fail to successfully put it into practice. For instance, one participant stated that information on employees’ career expectations is indeed being collected but not properly processed. Instead, vacancies are still filled by means of the informal circuit. Finally, a third category of respondents belonged to organizations that they themselves labeled as ‘best practices’ in the field of career management, and that actively use career orientation interviews and personal development plans in order to stimulate all types of internal mobility and to make employees more self-steering in their career development. Thus, the career support provided to employees by the or-

ganization has an impact on the extent to which respondents reported making career moves.

Vertical advancement on the internal labor market

Even though career advancement has come to include a wide range of career moves, vertical advancement is in many organizations still the only type of career mobility for which formal structures or career paths are designed. The discussions held during our focus groups however, confirm the existence of many shortcomings or hindrances at company level when it comes to supporting this traditional upward pattern. In particular, organizational career practices stimulating vertical growth do not obtain the desired outcomes due to several practical hindrances on the work floor (Gutteridge et al 1993; Baruch 2004). For example, several respondents said that in fact, they have been sitting on the same chair for the last few years and have simply been given more and more responsibilities instead of making a real career move. Another shortcoming that appeared is a loss of freedom of choice. This was typified by one person who said: "Sometimes you cannot refuse an offer to change jobs since someone else has already taken your current position". Furthermore, some respondents emphasized that some positions can only be reached by people with a certain level of educational qualification. Another concern that respondents highlighted is that many line managers fail in their role of career counselor (Sonnenfeld 1984) or lack appropriate knowledge about the competencies and skills of their employees. It is obvious that this is an essential condition to let employees move towards a job that matches their needs and capacities. To conclude, the keyword that prevailed in each of the focus groups was communication. Respondents felt a strong need for clear communication from the employer about the opportunities regarding career movements on the internal labor market. They say that "there is a lot of talking but not enough clear communication".

Horizontal movements on the internal labor market

Respondents identified two problem areas with regard to horizontal mobility, which can be situated at the organizational and at the individual level. First, from an organizational perspective, moving people between different departments or business units may not be as easy as it seems. Respondents quote an unsuitable organizational structure or reluctant management as examples of obstacles to gaining cross-departmental experiences. On the other hand, the problem might be situated at the individual level since taking up different types of responsibilities requires particular competencies and skills and not every respondent in our focus group appeared to be equally motivated to broaden their field of expertise. In this respect, respondents also mentioned the risks associated with making a cross-functional movement, if the new function would not match their interests or capacities. Temporary movements through project jobs were therefore considered as a valued and 'safer' alternative by several respondents.

Mobility on the external labor market

Our respondents stated that making career moves between organizations requires a far more mature approach, both on behalf of the employee and the employer. Employees as well as employers may benefit from cross-organizational exchanges in terms of gaining experience and getting a different perspective on their job challenges. How-

ever, most respondents mentioned that changing employer is still considered as a sign of dissatisfaction about the current employer and therefore in most organizations it is ignored as a possible career movement in career discussions held with line managers or HR. Moreover, it appears to be much more acceptable for employees in the early, exploratory, stage of their career.

The transition between employment and non-paid activity

This section addresses the issue of combining employment and non-paid activity such as care-taking activities or leisure time. Today, the increasing proportion of women in the workforce and the reduced willingness of employees to sacrifice family life and leisure time for the sake of a career, heighten the organizational awareness of work-life balance issues (Friedman et al. 2000). Organizations can respond to this need for better balance by (1) increasing their flexibility in terms of working time or work location, (2) facility regulations (e.g. child care, sports facilities), or (3) accepting or stimulating alternatives to the traditional fulltime employment statute, such as part-time work or career breaks (Danau/Van Dongen 2002). In view of our focus on career transitions, we address company policies with regard to the latter.

Impact of alternative employment arrangements on career development

Respondents in our focus groups mentioned several problems regarding the impact of employment arrangements that deviate from the norm of fulltime employment on chances for being promoted. Although a temporary career break or working part-time improved their private situation, several of them were frustrated because they felt being passed over for promotion or because they were not selected to participate in key projects (Branine 1999; Buyens/Wouters 2001). As one person, who had decided not to work part-time, commented: "Part time working would be bad for my career, it would restrict my future opportunities". Furthermore, part time workers expect to have difficulty when looking for another job, either inside or outside their organization since most vacancies request fulltime employment.

Specifically those respondents that worked part-time also mentioned an increased work load relative to the number of hours worked and disproportionate adjustment of objectives. (Branine 1999). As quoted by one respondent: "We have to realize 100% of the objectives in 80% of our time, we complete 5-day work in 4". Related to this is the problem of filling up the gaps caused by working time reductions. Respondents observe a natural reflex of management to react on less full time equivalents by overloading colleagues. They state that the success of part time working is heavily dependent on goodwill on behalf of the colleagues. In order to avoid structural work overload, respondents express a strong need for strategic top management support in this matter (Illegems/Verbeke 2001). The final difficulty that respondents refer to in the context of working time reductions is communication between colleagues or within teams as well as towards customers. Exchange of information and passing on internal knowledge becomes more difficult if people spend less time in the office (Sels/Dejonckhere 1999).

Thus, while Schmid (1998) argues in his transitional labor market model to encourage and facilitate individuals to find the ideal combination between paid work and

other social activities, our focus groups reveal many hindrances at company level that need to be overcome in practice.

The transition from unemployment to employment

Within the contemporary socio-economic environment, layoffs caused by company restructurings lead to the unemployment of groups of employees that have built up several years of working experience and that most of the time did not choose for the option of becoming unemployed. Making the transition from unemployment to employment becomes especially challenging for this group, as well as for those that lost their job on an individual basis, certainly in view of the high unemployment ratio in Belgium.

In order to investigate factors affecting this transition, we included white-collar workers and executives as well as blue-collar workers in our focus groups. The majority of participants' opinions relating to the application process and more specifically recruitment channels and testing, were similar to young graduates' feelings. In our discussion we therefore focus on those factors pointed out by more experienced job seekers.

Response on behalf of the recruiting company

First, the respondents that belonged to the white-collar and executive group perceived the application process as extremely frustrating because very often they did not obtain any response to their multiple applications. One person expressed his frustration in the following way: "The application process becomes more and more frustrating because of the lack of response on behalf of the recruiter and the uncertainty this creates". For this reason, these respondents strongly argued in favor of some kind of a methodological approach to the application process in terms of a clear-cut step-by-step plan in which applicants receive feedback at relevant stages.

Recruitment channels

Furthermore, white collar and executive job seekers highly appreciated the internet as an information source, but regret that most of the vacancies are intended for younger applicants. This contrasts with the complaint by young graduate job seekers as outlined before, about the requirement of work experience. It appears that vacancies posted on commercial jobsites are mostly meant for young job-hoppers in the context of pure job mobility, whilst the most important target groups on the labor market are young graduates and older unemployed job seekers.

Although it is the intention of recruitment consultants to facilitate the inflow into employment, it was remarkable that there was much resentment towards this kind of recruitment channel. More highly educated job seekers questioned the quality of available jobs and the ethics of consultants, whereas those with lower educational qualifications reported having problems with the geographical distances they were asked to make without any compensation, or the speed with which they had to be available when they would be offered a job.

Selection criteria

As far as selection criteria are concerned, the white-collar and executive job seekers mainly reported financial, age-related or qualification-related arguments that retained them from finding another job that matched their expectations. The blue-collar job

seekers spoke of stigmatization and discrimination as major obstacles in their search for a new job (Gorter et al. 1993; Vos et al. 2000; Gorter 2001).

Temporary contracts

Neither target group felt happy about temporary employment contracts. There were some negative attitudes towards temporary work because of the less favorable financial aspects, uncertainty, lack of continuity, lower status of the job and lack of involvement with the job or with the organization. One person explained: "Now I am 50 years old. If I accept a temporary job, I have to apply again within a year. Who would want to hire me then?"

The transition from employment to retirement

The last transition addresses the final step in the professional career, i.e. the transition from employment to retirement. In view of the current debate in Belgium on encouraging the employees to work longer (OECD 2004), the perceptions of older workers regarding the timing of their retirement and the importance of HR-policies that take into account the specific needs of older workers are receiving an increased attention from HR-practitioners as well as policy makers.

Perceptions about the transition into retirement

With only one exception, all blue collar workers in our focus group had accepted their employer's offer to retire early at the age of 55. They stated that they did not encounter substantial problems when making this transition. They say they welcomed their early retirement for several reasons (Kremer/Harpaz 1982). First, the current economic context characterized by delocalization and downsizing has been shown to be a serious source of uncertainty. Therefore, the retirement decision appears to be strongly driven by the unwillingness of older workers to go through company restructurings once again. Furthermore, early retirement has become so common that it appears to have become a norm instead of an exception. On the contrary, those executive respondents who had to retire early due to company restructurings felt themselves forced into retirement while they were willing to work for a longer period (Kee-Lee/Chow 2005). Hence, they perceived their career ending as an abrupt transition for which they were not prepared. "We had a full agenda until our last working day. It was as if the lights were turned off all of a sudden."

'Age-conscious HRM'

Literature to date offers a range of different initiatives in the area of HR that can encourage employees aged 55 and above to remain active (Dytchwald et al. 2004; Saba/Guerin 2005). Notwithstanding these calls for an 'age-conscious' approach are frequently discussed in both academic and practitioners literature, there seem to be a number of organizational barriers which undermine their successful implementation. First, according to the respondents in our focus groups, it is still a fact that age is used as a major selection or redundancy criterion (Chiu et al. 2001). Respondents said they were evaluated on their high labor cost and they reported feeling stigmatized by being an 'older' employee. Respondents mention that the mindset about older employees should change before they can be encouraged to work longer while staying committed.

One HR-domain in which age appeared to be a determining factor was training and development. This was mainly an issue for the white collar respondents who stressed the importance of continuous learning and development but at the same time experienced decreasing access to training activities while getting older.

All respondents agreed that mentorship is a valuable role for older workers, which would not only increase their perceived value in the company but which would also enhance the transfer of know-how. However, those respondents who reported the use of mentoring in their organization felt the system did not reach its objectives by lack of follow up.

Finally, the blue collar respondents in our focus group stressed the importance of modifications to working time arrangements (no more shift work). In addition, modifications in job content or workload for older employees were perceived as a necessity by all respondents but they mentioned the absence of these type of arrangements in most companies due to the overall high workload, often a consequence of outsourcing or downsizing. One person commented: "In the past you could run down by switching to a job in the warehouse for example, but now all those alternative jobs have disappeared or have been outsourced". Finally, the benefit of working part-time at the end of the career was considered as a valuable option by all respondents, but all kinds of practical or organizational obstructions (such as nature of the job, overload for other employees, management resistance, lower value of part-time workers, limited availability etc.) were mentioned as factors preventing this option from becoming a common practice. Finally most respondents stressed their concern for making tailored arrangements with every older worker, taking into account his or her personal needs, ambitions and capacities rather than taking aggregate measures.

With an ageing workforce, not only postponement of retirement but also return to the labor market might become an important career transition. However, our research shows that both organizations and individuals do not yet consider re-entry into the labor market as a realistic option. Both parties appear to feel comfortable with early retirement systems, respectively for reasons of productivity and financial causes, and admit that they hope to benefit from this system as long as it exists.

Discussion

Reçi and de Bruijn (2004: 2) state that "the theory of transitional labor markets has received a wide attention, not only from the academic discipline of sociology (Schmid 1998; O'Reilly/Bothfeld 2003; Wilthagen 2001), but also from other disciplines such as economics (Muffels 2001; Gazier/Schmid 2002; Auer 2002; de Koning 2002), organization theory (Rubbery/O'Reilly 2000) and law". The contribution of this paper is that we concentrate on the application of this model in human resources as part of organization theory, yielding important insights for human resource management with regard to labor market and job mobility. Although a significant body of knowledge has examined the conditions and implications of this model at the macro level (Reçi/de Bruijn 2004), implications at the meso level, in particular organizations being the middle ground where careers are played out, is an important yet understudied area. The organization itself is affected by most macro variables, yet it has its own ability to facilitate or hinder the employee's career development process through its processes and

policies (Buyens/Wouters 2001). In the first place this study was motivated by a desire to understand the role of organizations in facilitating or hindering their employees' career transitions from a broad perspective. Furthermore, we noted that previous research on mobility and careers has put the main emphasis on either the individual component (individual career management) or the organizational component (organizational career management) with regard to this issue. For this reason, the goal of this study was to understand reactions of those individuals involved in a particular career transition to company-level determinants. In this respect, our study helped us to better understand to what extent company policy is decisive for people's choices regarding career transitions and which factors at company level the persons concerned point to as obstructing or facilitating choices. For this to occur, we conducted a qualitative oriented research by means of focus groups.

Our findings suggest that the dominant presence of traditional, permanent employment on the Belgian labor market shown in prior research (Heylen et al. 2005), is reflected in organizational policies. Notwithstanding the substantial literature on company arrangements that may support employees' career transitions, the results of this study provide evidence suggesting that the concrete implementation of these practices on the work floor is hindered by all kinds of practical and organizational barriers. For instance, job seekers defined a wide range of obstructing factors in the recruitment practices they are confronted with during the application process. Although in theory most organizations recognize the importance of job mobility, in many cases effective career systems are lacking that support or encourage employees to make lateral transitions on the internal labor market. Alternative work arrangements appear to be condemned to fail in the absence of required modifications in the work environment and part-time jobs for elder workers are relatively scarce because of a lack of organizational support.

As a consequence, we can derive from our findings significant implications for managers as well as policy makers. Firstly, we need to point out that when listing up the determinants of the (professional) career at company level, we observed indistinct boundaries between 'facilitating' and 'obstructing' factors. What is seen in theory as a facilitating circumstance, can in practice be undermined by the manifestation of diverse types of organizational side-effects, as for example part-time work and reduced promotion opportunities.

As to the traditional *transition into employment*, our results clearly show that giving information and process guidance are important pillars of a policy that aims to lead job seekers into jobs. Even more important in the view of the target group is a stricter follow-up of the extent to which recruitment agencies follow the ethical code. Awareness of their responsibilities however, will not be a sufficient motivation for organizations to recruit in a 'labor market aware' manner. A company is not a social institution, but a profit-driven entity ruled by economic interests. If policy makers want to bring the business world on board, then the incentives will have to match up with their economic driving force. In that sense, we already see today that companies can much more easily be induced to make greater efforts when it concerns vacancies for which they have difficulty in finding suitable workers on the labor market. Second condition for companies to step on board is that they have the knowledge and information at their disposal that is required to be able to put such a policy into practice.

Furthermore, our results indicate that the traditional *exit phase* too has its painful areas. The social value of the measures that have been taken in order to encourage employees to work longer and to encourage organizations to work out age-conscious HR-policies is recognized by the various actors, but bringing these measures into practice remains a problem. When it comes to self-interest, employees appear to want to end their working life earlier and employers seem to have little faith in the added value of older employees or they step back when they see the older employee's labor cost. This combination leads to a noticeable early exit, whether obligatory or not. So as to give an appropriate response, policy needs to go further, delineating the necessary implementation modalities. This should also contribute to a culture in which it is 'normal' and not an exception to work longer. Finally results indicate that organizations need to recognize that a curative approach is of limited use. Instead, a pro-active course of action needs to be stimulated. This basically means that organizations should not direct all their efforts to the present generation of 'older people', but that the end-of-career policy should already include the younger generations. In this respect, organizations need to consider the inclusion of career breaks or part-time work during employees careers as means to keep this generation motivated and committed during the later stages of their career.

This leads us to the issues of *job mobility and work-life balance*, being the transitions in which the atypical nature of the so-called 'new' career patterns is mainly shown. We have found that a growing number of organizations is creating opportunities for internal mobility that deviate from the traditional vertical career path. However, certainly in smaller organizations making career transitions on the internal labor market is still an exception rather than a commodity. With respect to work-life balance, our research shows that once again, structures are often in place, but that alternative employment statutes or making a career break are not embedded in the company culture.

To sum up, our findings show that at the company level there are several factors that hinder the effective implementation of institutional initiatives aimed at fostering a transitional labor market, as the organization is the agent by which these policies are applied to individuals. Nonetheless, organizations too may benefit from a transitional labor market, both with regard to traditional and transitional career steps. As to the former, the future demographic evolutions urge organizations to bring the 'obligatory' traditional entry and exit transition into focus since the number of talented applicants to recruit is dropping and employees will be forced to work longer. A transitional labor market fostering multiple transitory states between employment and other social spheres will allow organizations to make optimal use of all potential talent. Our findings suggest that in order to fully incorporate the ideas of the transitional labor market model in HR-policies and practices, policy makers will have to convince organizations to eliminate the barriers at the meso level that individuals in our study spoke about.

Limitations and future research

Like any study, this one has limitations that leave unanswered questions providing opportunities for future research. First, the breadth and scope of the labor market and job mobility theme make it difficult to encapsulate all factors that come into play with each career transition. While our study contributes to the career management literature

by approaching the career concept from a life span perspective, drawing an integral picture of the individual's career course, it precludes at the same time a fine-grained analysis of each specific transition. Therefore, future research should focus more in-depth on each particular transition and complement the current findings by assessing more organizational-level factors triggering or hindering these career steps. A second research opportunity arises from the explorative and descriptive nature of our study. As with any qualitative research, issues arise about the generalizability and the highly subjective nature of our findings. Thirdly, the results of our study should be considered in view of the characteristics of our research sample. This in-depth research was conducted with a limited number of participants which implies further cross-validation in order to assess whether the perceptions we have found also apply within different research populations. Therefore, they need further validation in future research that might, for instance, further examine the impact of organizational factors we defined by conducting a quantitative, multiple level survey about company practices and how these affect the career decisions of the employees involved. Ideally, longitudinal research should be conducted in order to study the impact of organizational factors during different career transitions throughout the career lifecycle at the intraindividual level, by following a panel of employees from their first steps into the labor market until their retirement. Despite these limitations, we believe our explorative research serves as a valuable basis for future research on career transitions.

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