

## Chapter VI

# Human Resource Portals and the Protean Career: A Three-Factor Model

Constant D. Beugré, Delaware State University, USA

### Abstract

---

*This chapter discusses the role of human resource portals in the management of the protean career. A protean career is a career that is frequently changing due to both changes in the person's interests, abilities, and values, and changes in the work environment. The chapter develops a three-factor model, which contends that three types of variables (individual attributes, characteristics of the human resource portals, and organizational factors) influence the effective use of Web-based human resource services. The model also argues that the effective use of Web-based human resource services plays an important role in the management of the protean career since employees act as free agents, responsible for*

*their own career advancement opportunities. The three-factor model has implications for research and practice for both employees and employers.*

## Introduction

---

Careers have been traditionally conceived as linear trajectories where employees advance hierarchically within a single organization over the course of their working lives (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003). The traditional career is a linear one, measuring success through upward promotions and salary increases. Recently, however, evolving organizational forms are moving workers away from traditional career patterns that emphasized upward progression within a limited number of traditional, pyramid-type organizations to nontraditional career patterns (Sullivan, Carden, & Martin, 1998). Careers are no longer limited to positions in one organization, but rather are viewed as more diversified professional experiences entailing working in different organizations and in different occupations. Hall (1996) and Mirvis and Hall (1996) used the construct of *protean career* to describe such career patterns. A protean career is a career that is frequently changing due to both changes in the person's interests, abilities, and values, and changes in the work environment (Hall, 1996). No longer do we expect a lifetime career to involve working in a single occupation or for a single employer (Jackson, 1996).

The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on the role of human resource portals in managing the protean career. In so doing, the chapter develops a three-factor model of the impact of human resource portals on the management of the protean career. The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section discusses the reasons leading to the emergence of the protean career. The second section explains the protean career. The third section describes HR portals. The fourth section presents the three-factor model of the protean career, which contends that three types of variables — organizational factors, HR portals system, and individual attributes — influence the effective use of Web-based HR services. Effective use of Web-based HR services plays an important role in the management of the protean career since employees act as free agents, responsible for their own career advancement opportunities. Finally, the fifth section discusses the model's implications for research and practice.

## Background

---

Four reasons at least explain the emergence of the new view of a career. First, downsizing has dramatically transformed the landscape of organizations not only in the United States but also in other industrialized nations, breaking the old psychological contract between employers and employees. A psychological contract refers to expectations about reciprocal obligations between employees and employers (Rousseau, 1989). Whereas under the old psychological contract, employees traded loyalty against job security, the new contract calls for employees to “look out” for themselves. Thus, the new career requires employees to be in the driver’s seat, leading both to personal responsibility and accountability in managing their careers. Under the new contract, the company undertakes to:

*“...add labor market value to employees by helping them acquire portable and marketable skills—employability...Self-determination is the underlying principle governing the organization, and in this spirit individuals manage their own careers.” (Nicholson, 1996, p. 41)*

Second, the emergence of knowledge workers — those workers who have specific rather than general competencies (Higgins & Kram, 2001) — redefines the role of careers. Because knowledge workers have skills and expertise that are in high demand, they tend to define the terms of their employment. For them, career success is defined in terms of knowledge acquisition and personal challenges, rather than in terms of progression in the hierarchy within the same organization. In a knowledge and information-based economy, the skills and knowledge of people with special expertise replace physical and financial capital as the essential assets of the organization (Brousseau, Driver, Eneroth & Larsson, 1996).

Third, the entry of Generation Xers in the workforce also shapes the dynamics of workplace demographics. They entered the workforce between 1985 and 2000, and are generally between 25 and 40 years old. Indeed, members of Generation X have more loyalty toward themselves and their networks of social relations than toward their employers. They are less willing to make personal sacrifices for the sake of their employers. But they are willing to trade off salary increases, titles, security, and promotions for increased leisure time and expanded lifestyle options (Robbins, 2003). This generation has values that do

not favor organizational commitment (Brousseau et al., 1996). Generation Xers want to explore and do different kinds of work in order to learn about themselves and express their individual values (Sellers, 1994).

Fourth, the advance of information technology and particularly the Internet and the World Wide Web has dramatically changed how organizations operate. The most far-reaching changes to careers are coming from transformations of work and organization by information technology (Nicholson, 1996). Information technology helps improve employee skills and the ability to acquire, process, and disseminate information. Information technology not only quickly spreads knowledge, but also gives power to those who possess it, challenging old assumptions about organizational hierarchy and leadership. It also helps create new forms of organizations. Such organizations strongly impact careers. Information technology also allows employees to develop networks including other experts and professionals, thereby playing a critical role in the development of the protean career. Information technology facilitates organizational changes, such as delayering, outsourcing, and offshoring (moving a company's operations in a foreign country to benefit from a cheaper labor pool). Such organizational changes make careers less permanent and versatile. By reducing management layers, today's organizations provide very few upward movements. Thus, career success is no longer defined in terms of vertical progression in a hierarchy, but in terms of psychological and personal success.

One of the implications of information technology is the development of human resource portals and Web-based human resource self-service systems. These information technologies have allowed employees to self-manage activities previously handled by human resource professionals. However, the mere development of these tools cannot enhance the self-management of careers unless employees effectively use them. The extent to which some employees are more likely than others to rely on human resource portals and Web-based human resource self-service systems to manage their own careers has received scant attention in the human resource management literature. This is a surprising view of the increasing use of these technologies in modern organizations. A survey of Fortune 500 companies conducted by Towers Perrin found that 39% of the companies provided annual benefit enrollment on the Web in 2000 compared to just 10% in 1999 (HR Focus, 2001).

Despite this increasing investment in human resource portals and Web-based human resource self-service systems, employees often do not use these tools for career management opportunities. A 2000 human resource self-service survey by the Hunter Group found that today's most widely used self-service

applications are employee communications (used by more than 60% of respondents) and 401(k) pension plans (more than 50%) (HR Focus, 2001). Although respondents in the same survey plan to greatly expand the use of personal data maintenance, benefit inquiries, open enrollment, family status changes, training registration, and so forth, they did not report using human resource self-service systems as tools for managing their own careers. Thus, understanding the factors influencing the effective use of HR portals is of paramount importance. In addition to providing information related to work benefits, HR portals offer opportunities for continuous learning and self-development.

The emergence of new technologies, competitive pressures from an ever-changing work environment, globalization of the world economy, and organizational changes, such as workforce diversity, delayering, outsourcing, offshoring, teamwork, networks, and the entry of Generation Xers in the workplace, are factors that call for a redefinition of the concept of a career. For instance, information technology makes it possible for employees to learn about the strategic direction of the business, about work opportunities in different areas, about specific position openings, and about upcoming training and development programs (Hall & Moss, 1998). This knowledge may help employees take advantage of new opportunities. Today's work environment, characterized by change and the breach of the psychological contract, requires employees to take control of their own careers. It is no longer the organization that "takes care" of the employee's career. Rather, it is the age of the "do-it-yourself" career. What the organization can do is provide opportunities for employees to manage their own careers. Human resource portals and Web-based human resource self-service represent such opportunities.

---

## **Protean Career**

---

### **Defining the Protean Career**

---

The term protean is derived from the Greek god Proteus, who could change shape at will. Hall (1996) used this construct to describe a career that is constantly changing and mostly driven by the employee himself or herself. The construct of protean career is similar to that of boundaryless career (Arthur &

Rousseau, 1996). Boundaryless means employment and careers unfolding overtime across multiple employment opportunities and employer firms (Rousseau & Arthur, 1999). Most research on the new career has often used the concept of boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Arthur, 1994). The boundaryless career is characterized by paths and trajectories that are not fixed lattices within organizations (Bird, 1994). As Sullivan (1999, p. 477) put it, “The term ‘boundaryless career’ is really a misnomer, as systems need boundaries in order to define themselves and to separate themselves from the environment. Therefore, in a real sense, careers are not boundaryless.” What authors using this concept really mean is that barriers across occupations and organizations are permeable. In this chapter, I use the construct of protean career to describe a career that is constantly changing, creates a free-agency relationship between employees and employers, and is self-directed. In discussing the protean career, I rely on the literatures on the protean career and on the boundaryless career. Although these literatures use different constructs, they describe the same reality, which is a career that is dynamic, changing, and self-directed.

## **Components of the Protean Career**

The protean career includes constant change, free-agency relationship between employees and employers, continuous learning, employability, self-direction, and multiple commitments. In a free-agency relationship, employees and employers exercise their right to form new contracts as needed, deploying their resources for their own benefit (Rousseau & Arthur, 1999). The free-agency relationship also implies that employees and employers consider their relationship as more transactional than relational. This contractual relationship is likely to continue as long as it is beneficial to both parties. Boundaryless careers treat both employers and employees as free agents even more explicitly than in traditional conceptualizations of the employment relationship (Van Buren III, 2003).

Another key element of the protean career is continuous learning and personal development. To the extent that employees possess skills that are valued by their employers, they will be likely to remain members of the organization. Therefore, employees have to seek out opportunities to develop and update their skills. Kanter (1989) used the concept of employability to explain the extent to which employees must acquire skills that increase their marketability.

Employability refers to a commitment to enhancing the skills and competencies of the employees so they can protect and continuously improve their options for gainful employment (Van Buren III, 2003). Developing skills is important in the age of the protean career because it helps improve both internal and external marketability. Employees with highly transferable competencies are not organizationally bound, but instead are highly marketable. Their competencies are portable and can be applied to different organizational settings (Sullivan et al., 1998).

A corollary of portable skills is the lack of organizational commitment. This is understandable since possessing a 'repertoire of portable skills' will allow employees to 'travel' from organizations to organizations. Thus, commitment is less directed toward a specific organization. According to Sullivan et al. (1998), the role identification of self-designing careerists comes predominantly from their profession rather than from their organizational membership. Whereas the traditional career separates work and family, the new career blends the two. In the traditional career, success is at the expense of the family and vice versa, leading to a zero-sum game situation. In the new career, however, professional success and family are not necessarily incompatible. This multiplicity of commitment includes the profession, the organization, the family, and social activities that the employee deems important. Diversity of activities in the new career helps the employee broaden his or her horizon, expertise, and knowledge.

### **Critical Success Factors in the Protean Career**

According to Hall (1996), there are three indicators of success under the protean career: (1) psychological success; (2) perceived internal marketability; and (3) perceived external marketability. Psychological success stems from accomplishing goals that the employee considers important. These goals may be career-related or personal goals. Success in the new career stems from fulfilling specific objectives that may not be career related. Since the protean career is not limited to one organization, employees must develop skills that increase their employability (Kanter, 1989). Employability is increased by both internal marketability and external marketability. The former refers to the extent to which employees have skills that are valued by their current employers, whereas the latter refers to skills that are valued by outside employers.

Employees under the protean career should also be able to develop social networks. Such networks are important for success. They may help garner information about job opportunities both inside and outside the employing organization. These social networks should extend beyond one's unit, department, or organization. Eby, Butts, and Lockwood (2003) consider the extensiveness of social networks within and outside the organization a critical success factor in the protean career. An employee may use networks to gather career-relevant rather than employer-relevant information (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994).

Despite its positive impact, the protean career has some pitfalls. Not all individuals will fare equally well in the protean career. Most employees are in a weaker bargaining position in the employment relationship than employers (Van Buren III, 2003). The path of a protean career is not linear; it can even be chaotic. What then would explain the extent to which some employees thrive in the protean career, whereas others fail? Several factors, individual as well as contextual, may help explain success in the protean career. Since the protean career is marked by peaks and valleys, employees should develop the kind of skills and *persona* that will help them navigate such situations. For instance, a layoff can have damaging effects on employees. Those employees who are emotionally strong may use the situation to revamp themselves and start anew. Those who cannot effectively manage this transition may have their professional career threatened. Technology, and especially information technology, can help successfully navigate the protean career. In the following section, I explain human resource management portals before developing a model of their impact on the management of the protean career.

## Human Resource Portals

---

A human resource portal (or HR portal) is a set of applications that provides users with a single gateway to customized and personalized information (Walker, 2001). This portal can be limited to a company intranet or it can extend to the Internet or include both. Using these portals, employees can collect information related to benefits, compensation, training opportunities, knowledge management, and continuous learning, to name a few. Human resource portals allow the development of Web-based human resource self-service.

*“Web-based human resource self-service involves the use of interactive technology by employees and managers to obtain information, conduct transactions, and essentially shortcut processes that previously required multiple steps, paperwork, the involvement of human resource staffers, and all the delays such processes are heir to.” (Zampetti & Adamson, 2001, p. 15)*

With the self-service provided by human resource portals, employees are able to become more self-sufficient with respect to many items previously handled by the human resource staff, such as making changes and additions to their own benefit programs, participating in annual benefit enrollments, selecting training and development plans, investigating job opportunities and postings, handling payroll deductions, participating in retirement planning, changing records such as marital status or address, and having access to company policies and procedures. By putting the responsibility for many information-management tasks, such as filing change-of-address forms and completing benefits enrollment, in the hands of employees, Web-based human resource self-service dramatically reduces the amount of time that human resource staffers spend on administrative tasks and frees them to focus their energy on achieving more strategic goals for the company, such as reducing turnover and developing skills inventories, and helps deliver human resource services with fewer people (Gale, 2003). Thus, the human resource function becomes less administrative and more strategic, aligning itself with the organization’s goals and objectives. Such tools may help employees manage their own careers. What is particularly important in HR portals is the opportunity to collect information about job opportunities inside and outside the organization, and to exploit training and learning opportunities. The Internet can be used as a self-learning tool, thereby helping employees develop new skills. HR portals must offer value to both employees and employers. According to Hansen and Deimler (2001), the benefits of business portals for both employees and companies are obvious:

*“Having information tools available on the company portal makes employees’ jobs easier and less stressful by reducing interaction time and effort. Because they spend less time searching for information, they are able to accomplish more and productivity rises. From the company’s perspective, not only are employees more efficient at getting work done, their efficiency reduces delays in core processes.” (p. 98)*

## **Benefits of HR Portals for Employees**

---

Why do employees have to take care of the management of their own career? One of the key reasons is that organizations can no longer do it. Thus, the protean career requires personal initiative and responsibility. In protean careers both employers and employees are free agents (Van Buren III, 2003). Free agency means that people and firms exercise their right to form new contracts as needed, deploying their resources (skills, discretionary time, money, reputation) for their own benefit (Rousseau & Arthur, 1999, p. 9). Therefore, employees should develop skills to increase their level of employability (Kanter, 1989). Employees who will thrive in the protean career are those who have specialized knowledge and expertise that make them valuable partners. They can exchange this expertise anywhere. Specifically, knowledge workers may thrive in the protean career. For these workers, professional commitment may replace organizational commitment. As Sullivan et al. (1998, p. 168) put it: "Individuals with highly transferable competencies are not organizationally bound, but instead are highly marketable. Their competencies are portable and can be applied to different organizational settings." Employees should develop a *repertoire of portable skills*, which refers to a set of skills that an employee possesses and that can be used in several organizations. The repertoire of portable skills may increase the employee's internal and external marketability.

## **Benefits of HR Portals for Organizations**

---

HR portals may help reduce costs and improve productivity. Organizations using HR portals can save an average of 60% (HR Focus, 2001). HR portals improve communication, reduce paperwork, and above all increase productivity. Portals in some ways create an organization without boundaries. For example, General Motors, DaimlerCrysler, and the International Union UAW (United Auto Workers) announced a plan in November 2000 to provide human resource functions to U.S. workers through employee portals. This plan connected 200,000 employees at General Motors and 100,000 employees at DaimlerCrysler with HR technology (Workforce, 2001). One of the goals of this plan was to improve efficiency and productivity.

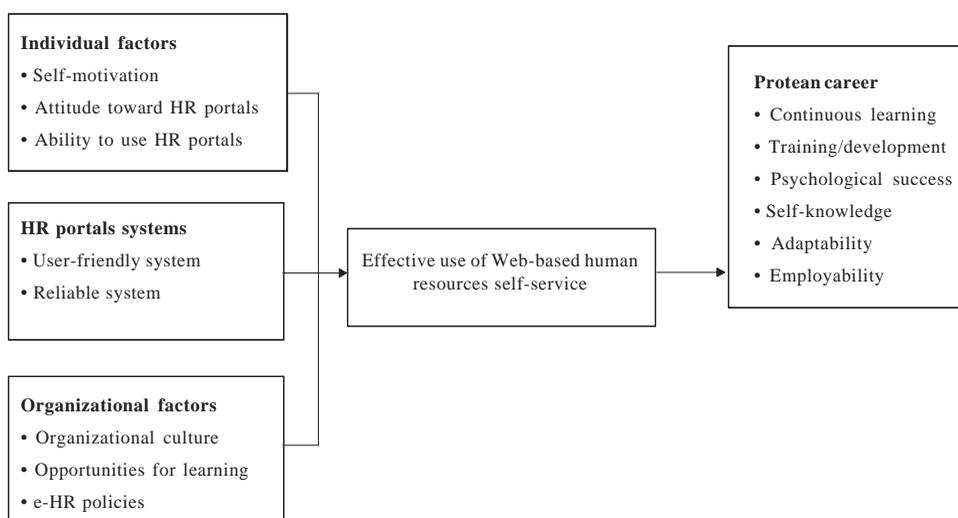
The return on investment (ROI) of HR portals includes reduction in phone calls, the availability of accurate data and information, improved retention and recruitment, and increased satisfaction with the human resources department. It also includes tangible costs, such as reduction in call center staffing, reduction in interactive voice response traffic and cost, and saving in paper and production (Brooks, 1998). HR portals can help locate those employees with particular expertise for new product development. They can also help easily locate suppliers and clients. In the recruiting area, an organization may create a database of prospective employees. Such a database may contain the names of employees from competitors, former employees who have left the company, job applicants who have rejected previous job offers, and friends of current employees. The organization may then manage the relationship established with these prospective employees (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001). HR portals also offer opportunities for e-learning. Employees can scan the site for training and development opportunities. By so doing, they may develop new skills that will increase both their internal and external marketability. Employers may also benefit from employees taking care of their own careers. To the extent that employees manage their own careers, organizations would reduce time and costs related to providing career counseling to employees. In the protean career, employers are able to purchase labor on a just-in-time basis, allowing them to gain flexibility (Van Buren III, 2003). Employers may also connect their portals to Internet recruiting sites, allowing them to facilitate the recruitment process. Employees and potential job applicants may directly apply for job vacancies. E-recruiting may lead to an open-labor market (Michaels et al., 2001) in which employees may apply for openings inside or outside their companies. To explain the role of HR portals in managing the protean career, I develop a three-factor model, which is discussed in the next section.

## **Three-Factor Model**

---

The three-factor model (Figure 1) contends that three types of factors — individual factors, factors related to HR portals, and organizational factors — influence the effective use of HR portals.

*Figure 1. A model of the Web-based human resource self-service and the protean career*



## Individual Factors

In this model, individual factors refer to the employee's personal characteristics that may affect the likelihood of using HR portals to manage his/her own career. These individual characteristics include self-motivation, attitude toward HR portals, and ability to use the HR portals. Although this list is not exhaustive, it captures the key individual factors that influence the effective use of Web-based human resources services. Self-motivation is a key determinant not only of the protean career, but also of an employee's growth and personal development in an organization:

*“Pursuing the protean career requires a high level of self-awareness and personal responsibility. Many people cherish the autonomy of the protean career, but many others find this freedom terrifying, experiencing it as a lack of external support.” (Hall, 1996, p. 10)*

To the extent that employees are “masters” of their own careers, they must find the inner drive that will help them pursue a meaningful career. Self-motivation

may help employees look for opportunities for continuous improvement and learning. Using Web-based human resource self-service requires self-discipline and self-motivation. Employees who are highly self-motivated would be likely to profit from the technology.

Likewise, employees who harbor a positive attitude toward the technology will be likely to embrace it. Indeed, employees who have a positive attitude toward HR portals would embrace them, whereas those who have a negative attitude would tend not to use the system. Thus, the mere existence of HR portals in an organization is not enough to make it successful. Employees must be willing to use the system. However, self-motivation and positive attitudes are not enough to use the system. Employees should be able to use HR portals. Organizations may help employees develop such abilities through training. Training employees to use the system would enhance the ability and level of comfort in using the system. Employees who are technologically challenged will not reap the benefits offered by such HR portals in managing their own careers.

### **Factors Related to the HR Portals**

---

These factors include the reliability of the system and the extent to which the system is user friendly. An HR portal is useful only if it is reliable and provides complete and accurate information. To the extent that it offers such information, it can be used as a tool for career information and continuous learning. The system should continuously work and the information it provides must be constantly updated. When the system does not provide accurate and complete information, employees may refrain from using it. In addition to being reliable, an HR portal system should be user friendly. A user-friendly system is less intimidating and likely to spur employee enthusiasm. Using the system should be straightforward and not cumbersome.

The system should also meet employee needs. Thus, before building an HR portal, a company should clearly determine which goals it intends to accomplish, and then select an appropriate team of information technology professionals and a vendor. An HR portal system that is not reliable and user friendly will have little appeal to employees. There are two types of e-learning that impact employee behavior, synchronous e-learning and asynchronous e-learning. In the first one, live instructors engage trainers into online discussions, whereas in the second one the trainer works at his/her own pace. Attendance in asynchronous e-learning requires self-discipline and self-motivation. How-

ever, technology is not the key issue when implementing HR portals. It is essentially the organizational culture and employee attitudes toward change that matter.

## **Organizational Factors**

---

Organizational factors include organizational culture, opportunities for continuous learning, and the existence of e-HR policies. When the organization supports the development and implementation of HR portals and provides opportunities for training and continuous learning, employees would be likely to use the system. An organizational culture that encourages innovation and continuous improvement would motivate employees to use new technologies. However, an organizational culture that cultivates the status quo may not generate the incentives for using new technologies. For instance, the effective use of HR portals entails an environment of continuous learning. Organizations may encourage continuous learning in different ways, including rewarding employees for skills developed (skill-based pay) and providing opportunities to learn new skills. Such opportunities may create an enthusiasm for e-learning. E-learning is an efficient way to re-skill employees. However, employees need self-management skills in order to tap the opportunities HR portals offer. The adoption of HR portals in an organization requires the development, implementation, and enforcement of e-HR policies. E-HR policies refer to rules and regulations guiding the proper use of HR portals. For instance, an organization may require employees not to abuse the system. Such policies must be enforced for an efficient use of the system.

Although the model identified three types of factors, it is worth mentioning that these factors are somehow related. For instance, the ability to use HR portals may influence attitudes toward the system. Indeed, employees who have developed the ability to use the system may view the system positively, whereas those who do not have the ability to effectively use it may view it negatively. Likewise, the reliability of the system may influence an employee's ability to use it. Employees may be more likely to use a system that is reliable than one that is unreliable. It is also possible that e-HR policies may affect the system usage. For instance, if managers train employees to use the portals, they may develop the skills required to effectively use the system.

In helping to manage the protean career, the three-factor model contends that the three types of factors facilitate the effective use of Web-based HR portals.

Specifically, the model contends that managing the protean career requires continuous learning from the employee, seeking out opportunities for training and development, psychological success, self-knowledge, employability, and adaptability. The use of Web-based human resource self-service transforms employees into discretionary investors of their own human capital (Gibbons, 2001). For instance, Allred, Snow, and Miles (1996) note that in today's environment, even in traditional organizations, managers and employees are assuming greater responsibility for planning their career moves and identifying the steps required to achieve them.

## **Implications of the Three-Factor Model**

The three-factor model contends that individual characteristics, factors related to HR portals, and organizational factors influence the effective use of Web-based human resource self-service. The effective use of such self-services dramatically impacts the management of the protean career. This model has implications for both research and practice.

### **Implications for Research**

Several lines of research may be gleaned from the three-factor model. First, researchers in career management and human resource management may test the key assumptions of the three-factor model. For instance, in analyzing the impact of HR portals on the management of the protean career, one may explore the following issues: What factors lead to the effective use of HR portals? Are these factors related to the individual, the technology itself, or the organizational context? Answers to these questions may prove useful since they may help improve our understanding of the impact of HR portals on the effective management of the protean career. Thus, the three-factor model awaits empirical validation.

Second, the protean career requires personal resilience and accountability. The extent to which such employees are likely to favor such career paths, whereas others may reject them, remains unclear. Perhaps individual factors, such as age, intelligence, and need for achievement, may play a role in such endeavors. Research explaining the impact of individual factors on the protean career is

very limited, if not nonexistent. The three-factor model identified only three individual factors — self-motivation, attitudes toward the system, and ability to use the system. Although these individual factors may play a key role in the effective use of Web-based HR self-services, other individual factors may also be explored. For instance, Sullivan et al. (1998) speculate that high intelligence may be a stronger predictor of an individual's choice of a self-designing career over a more traditional career. To the extent that self-designing careerists are good problem solvers, they may be likely to take advantage of the opportunities HR portals offer in managing their own careers. Empirical studies may investigate such claims.

Third, researchers should explore the extent to which some organizational factors facilitate or inhibit the use of Web-based HR self-services. The three-factor model postulates that organizational factors, such as culture, the existence of an environment of continuous learning, and e-HR policies may facilitate the effective use of Web-based HR self-services. Research on the effects of such organizational factors may also have practical implications since managers tend to control more organizational factors than individual attributes. For instance, managers may design organizational cultures that are conducive to continuous learning and the use of new technologies.

Finally, researchers may explore the impact of societal culture on the adoption of Web-based HR self-services, and most importantly the emergence of the protean career. In a given country, attitudes toward change may influence workers' readiness toward less traditional career types. For instance, employees in a risk-averse culture may be less likely to embrace the protean career than their counterparts from a risk-prone culture. Indeed, the protean career requires that employees manage their own careers. However, in a culture where employees expect organizational authorities to meet their career needs, they may consider the organization as the ultimate authority that should manage their career. Addressing these issues requires empirical investigations. Although the three-factor model awaits empirical validation, it presents some insights for management practice.

## **Implications for Practice**

---

The three-factor model contends that individual characteristics, factors related to HR portals, and organizational factors influence the effective use of HR portals. Although managers may not directly control individual factors related

to employees, they may impact the remaining two. For instance, managers may develop an organizational culture that facilitates the implementation of changes, and specifically technological changes. To the extent that employees are allowed to experiment with new processes and ideas, they would be likely to use new technologies that help develop such skills. Managers may also help develop HR portals that are user friendly and meet employee needs. They may also develop clear policies guiding the use of Web-based HR self-services.

For organizations, managing the protean career can represent a challenge. How do you provide opportunities for employees if these employees do not have any loyalty and commitment to the organization? How do you tap the productivity of employees who have a free-agency relationship with the organization? Why should employers create organizational environments where employees would become externally marketable and leave the organization? What does such a strategy bring to the bottom line? Indeed, discussing the management of the protean career raises more questions than it provides answers. The implementation of HR portals helps employers streamline operations and processes, reduce costs, and provide employees opportunities for skill development and personal growth. Such gains may help improve productivity. However, changes in both the external and internal environments of organizations require a new definition of the career. Since organizations are becoming leaner, there are fewer positions at the top to which employees can aspire. Therefore, one of the new strategies would consist of developing a free-agency arrangement in which both employers and employees meet their obligations as long as their mutual contract holds.

Managers should consider the effective use of Web-based human resource self-services as stemming from the combination of individual, organizational, and technological factors. For instance, employees would be more likely to use a system that is reliable and user friendly. However, when the system is not reliable or does not provide complete and up-to-date information, employees may see no reason to use it. Similarly, employees should develop the skills to use the system. This requires training opportunities from the organization. Finally, the adoption of an HR portal requires the development and implementation of policies governing the use of the system. The existence of such policies may reduce the likelihood of abusing the system. However, organizations should realize that the system might be a double-edged sword. As HR portals help organizations reduce costs and improve efficiency, they also help employees develop skills and competencies, making them marketable in the open labor market (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001). Such employees may

be likely to leave the organization for better opportunities. However, it is better for an organization to lose an uncommitted employee than to keep such an employee. Lack of commitment and loyalty may prove more damaging to the organization than the loss of an excellent employee.

Despite management efforts to facilitate the effective use of HR portals and thereby the management of the protean career, the bulk of this process lies with individual employees. Employees must assume personal responsibility. The three-factor model takes the view that although organizational programs must support nontraditional careers, individuals must assume responsibility for their own career management (Sullivan et al., 1998). However, managing the protean career can be a daunting task. Although most people are highly optimistic all the time (Lovallo & Kahneman, 2003), employees should avoid over-optimism when it comes to managing their careers. They should objectively assess their own strengths and weaknesses and develop career strategies accordingly. With its emphasis on personal responsibility, accountability, and continuous learning, the protean career is more suitable to knowledge workers.

## Conclusions

---

This chapter has developed a three-factor model that provides an insight in understanding the role of HR portals in managing the protean career. To realize the potential of the new career, the individual must develop competencies related to the management of self and career (Hall, 1996). Technology, and specifically information technology, can provide such an avenue:

*“HR is simultaneously positioning firms and workers to respond flexibly to market changes while seeking stability by recruiting, developing, and retaining people whose talents are critical to the firm.” (Rousseau & Arthur, 1999, p. 7)*

Despite its advantages, the protean career is not necessarily for everyone. The protean career may be beneficial to people with valuable skills, but might prove harmful to employees who do not have such skills. The protean career requires personal responsibility as well as accountability. Employees are responsible for developing their own career trajectories and managing them. In case of

success, the glory will be theirs. However, in case of failure, the blame will be theirs too. Employees should therefore avoid being victims of the self-serving bias — that is, taking credit for positive outcomes (e.g., career success) and blaming external factors for negative outcomes (e.g., career failure). An employee embarking on the path of the protean career may reflect on Komisar's (2000) advice:

*“Figure out who you are. What do you love to do? How do you want to live? Then, don't let a career drive you, let passion drive you.” (p. 174)*

## References

---

- Allred, B.B., Snow, C.C., & Miles, R.E. (1996). Characteristics of managerial careers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Academy of Management Executive*, 10(4), 17-27.
- Arthur, M.B. (1994). The boundaryless career: A new perspective of organizational inquiry. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 15, 295-309.
- Arthur, M.B., & Rousseau, D. (1996). A new career lexicon for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Academy of Management Executive*, 10(4), 28-39.
- Bird, A. (1994). Careers as repositories of knowledge: A new perspective on boundaryless careers. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 15, 325-344.
- Brooks, M.K. (1998). HR intranets: An ROI strategy. *HR Focus*, (August), 13-14.
- Brousseau, K.R., Driver, M.J., Eneroth, K., & Larsson, R. (1996). Career pandemonium: Realigning organizations and individuals. *Academy of Management Executive*, 10(4), 52-66.
- DeFillipi, R.J., & Arthur, M.B. (1996). Boundaryless context and careers: A competency-based perspective. In M.B. Arthur & D.M. Rousseau (Eds.), *The boundaryless career* (pp. 116-131). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Eby, L.T., Butts, M., & Lockwood, A. (2003). Predictors of success in the era of the boundaryless career. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 24, 689-708.

- Gale, S.F. (2003). Three stories of self-service success. *Workforce*, 82(1), 60-62.
- Gibbons, J. (2001). Technology and employee development. In A.J. Walker (Ed.), *Web-based human resources* (pp. 96-110). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Hall, D.T. (1996). Protean careers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Academy of Management Executive*, 11(3), 8-16.
- Hall, D.T., & Moss, J.E. (1998). The new protean career contract: Helping organizations and employees adapt. *Organizational Dynamics*, (Winter), 22-37.
- Hansen, M.T., & Deimler, M.S. (2001). Cutting cost while improving morale. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 43(1), 96-100.
- Higgins, M.C., & Kram, K.E. (2001). Reconceptualizing mentoring at work: A developmental network perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, 28, 264-288.
- HR Focus. (2001). The payoffs of self-service HR are significant. *HR Focus*, 78(1), 10-11.
- Jackson, C. (1996). Managing and developing a boundaryless career: Lessons from dance and drama. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 3(4), 617-628.
- Kanter, R.M. (1989). *When giants learn to dance: Mastering the changes of strategy, management, and careers in the 1990s*. New York: Basic Books.
- Komisar, R. (2000). Goodbye career, hello success. *Harvard Business Review*, (March-April), 160-174.
- Lovallo, D., & Kahneman, D. (2003). Delusions of success: How optimism undermines executives' decisions. *Harvard Business Review*, (July), 56-63.
- Michaels, E., Handfield-Jones, H., & Axelrod, B. (2001). *The war for talent*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Mirvis, P.H., & Hall, D.T. (1994). Psychological success and the boundaryless career. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 15, 365-380.
- Nicholson, N. (1996). Career systems in crisis: Change and opportunity in the information age. *Academy of Management Executive*, 10, 40-51.

- Robbins, S.P. (2003). *Essentials of organizational behavior* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Rousseau, D.M. (1989). Psychological and implied contracts in organizations. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 2, 322-337.
- Rousseau, D.M., & Arthur, M.B. (1999). The boundaryless human resource function: Building agency and community in the new economic era. *Organizational Dynamics*, (Spring), 7-17.
- Sellers, P. (1994). Don't call me a slacker. *Fortune*, (December 12), 181-196.
- Sullivan, S.E. (1999). The changing nature of careers: A review and research agenda. *Journal of Management*, 25, 457-484.
- Sullivan, S.E., Carden, W.A., & Martin, D.F. (1998). Careers in the next millennium: Directions for future research. *Human Resource Management Review*, 8, 165-185.
- Van Buren III, H.J. (2003). Boundaryless careers and employability obligations. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 13(2), 131-149.
- Walker, A.J. (2001). Best practices in HR Technology. In A.J. Walker (Ed.), *Web-based human resources* (pp. 3-14). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Workforce. (2001). *Making on-line self-service work*, (January), 54-61.
- Zampetti, R., & Adamson, L. (2001). Web-based employee self-service: A win-win proposition for organizations and employees. In A.J. Walker (Ed.), *Web-based human resource* (pp. 15-23). New York: McGraw-Hill.