Sailing With the Wind: Navigating the Chaotic Future of Employment with Strategic Career Management

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops a strategic career management framework. In doing so it also develops a definition of strategic career management as a progressive series of proactive and intentional job decisions and actions that are based upon a thorough strategic analysis. Drawing from the organization strategy literature, a strategic approach for individual career management relies heavily on conducting a thorough strategic analysis of the general and task environments and the individual’s internal resources and competencies. The strategic analysis provides a foundation for individuals to create a strategic position in the increasingly competitive labor market. The framework's key lies in the coalignment of individual internal resources and competencies with the changing dynamics of the external environment. Our conclusion is that effective strategic career management involves a wholistic integrated approach with career and life.
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Dramatic developments in technology, globalization, demographics, socio-cultural values and deregulation create a dynamic competitive landscape that is a central concern in strategic management (Schendel, 1995; Bettis & Hitt, 1995; Hitt, Keats, & DeMarie, 1998). While aligning organization strategies with environmental changes to optimize performance is a major concern of managers (Anderson & Zeithaml, 1984; Prescott, 1986 Hambrick, 1988), little or no research addresses the fit of individuals with significant environmental shifts. The environment can no longer be considered stable for individual career development. As organizations change and the nature of careers change (Sullivan, 1998), this paper argues that many conceptual analytical tools from organizational strategy are also relevant and critical to effective career management at the individual level in a dynamic environment.

Many experts providing career advice primarily focus on the individual (Schwartz & Brechner, 1982; Super, Thompson, Lindeman, Jordaan, & Myers, 1988; Edwards & Edward, 1996; Moreau, 1996; Kennedy & Laramore, 1997; Bolles, 1999). We value the insightful research on careers and concur with the importance of evaluating the individual’s internal resources and competencies in the strategic management of her career. Individual resources and competencies include, among other things, education, experience, endowments, passions, aspirations, interests, aptitudes, knowledge and skills all of which enable one to build a career. Unfortunately, this literature has paid little or no attention to the competitive dynamics of the profession’s environment. We seek to develop a normative theoretical framework that highlights the necessity for a strategic approach to career management within the competitive and chaotic
environment of the 21st century.

The strategic career management framework presented here is based upon the premise that navigating one's career path successfully will include the coalignment of internal resources and competencies with the changing external realities. Grant (1995: 9) observed "...that successful individuals in terms of recognition, power and material rewards are not, most commonly, those with the greatest innate abilities. Central to the success of individuals within each of their highly competitive spheres is the pursuit of strategies...". He elaborates further with four points attributed to successful career strategies: clear, long-term career objectives, knowledge of their environment, knowledge of self and pursuit of career with commitment, consistency, and determination. Our framework for strategic career management builds upon Grant's suggestions with specific applications of organization strategy concepts to the individual.

In developing our framework, the following discussion presents an overview of the strategic career management framework that is compared with two perspectives of earlier approaches to career management. Next, strategic concepts for analyzing the external environment which is divided into the general and task environments and the individual internal resources and competencies are developed. Then, the next section outlines strategic positioning as an important component of strategic career management. Finally, the last sections discuss how the different strategic concepts are related to one another and how they need to be integrated together in order to create a coherent whole between career and life.

These recommendations are particularly relevant in the career environment of the 21st century. Recent trends illustrate the benefits of integrating career management and strategic management. Successful career management will rely increasingly on an individual's ability to navigate her way toward achieving goals. Projections suggest that by the year 2000 companies
will employ fewer people, be less hierarchical and more service focused (Kiechel, 1993).
Employees, in turn, will be expected to be constant learners with the capacity to do higher-order thinking (Kiechel, 1993). As workplace uncertainty continues to increase, so will the workplace challenges (Hall and Richter, 1990). With this will come the motivation and need for people to give and receive help (Kram and Hall, 1991; 1996). Further, individuals, hoping to remain employable, will need to assume increasing responsibility for the management of their careers (McCanna, Pearse, & Zrebiec, 1994; Kiechel, 1993; Labich, 1991). In short, more of us are likely to have a “boundaryless career” (Sullivan, 1999) where we work for several organizations and perhaps within several industries (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 1996 cited in Sullivan, 1999; Peiperl & Baruch, 1997). This emphasizes the importance of the strategic management of our own careers, so as to gain a sustainable competitive advantage.

We conceptualize strategic career management as a progressive series of proactive and intentional job decisions and actions that are based upon thorough strategic analyses. According to Gutek & Larwood (1987) subsequent jobs indicating more progress and success may include one or more of the following – increasing organizational responsibility, obtaining higher social status, moving further up the hierarchical structure, garnering greater compensation and increasing choices in selection of projects or programs. The approach outlined in this paper considers the important realities of the external environmental forces and competitive dynamics in a turbulent labor market. Our approach draws from the economic and sociological literature in strategic management of organizations, which we hope will complement and expand the existing career literature perspectives.
A Proposed Framework for Strategic Career Management

The framework for strategic career management is built upon the idea of a co-alignment between the internal resources and competencies of the individual with external environmental competitive pressures. Our contribution lies in developing a more thorough analysis of the external environment matched with competitive positioning within the total workforce to enhance the individual’s efforts to manage her career. This addresses Collin and Young’s (1986) argument for a need to develop an ecological and systems approach in developing new directions for theories of career where interaction between the individual and the environment (ecological framework) are taken into account, as well as conceptualizing the complexities of ecological phenomena (systems approach). The paper proposes a framework of strategic career management that integrates previous research in careers with important analytical tools from the literature on strategic management of organizations. In our framework outlined in Figure 1, the analysis of the interaction between the individual internal resources and competencies and the external competitive pressures leads to the choice of a strategic competitive career position within the workforce. Prior career choices combined with strategic career analysis leads the individual to strategic decisions in managing her career that provides a level of career fulfillment which in turn feeds back information for a continuous cycle of strategic career management.

Insert Figure 1.
About here

Earlier Approaches to Career Management

Strategic management of careers has two perspectives. The first perspective involves the
ways in which the organization might manage and develop the careers of organizational members, especially those identified as part of the stable core (DeLuca, 1988), for the benefit of the organization and its strategic competitiveness (Sonnenfeld & Peiperl, 1988; Sonnenfeld, Peiperl, & Kotter, 1988). The second perspective focuses on the individual's own career goals and the factors that impact decision making at different career stages (Sonnenfeld & Kotter, 1982; Colin & Young, 1986). This literature focuses primarily on individual traits, endowments, passions, experiences and aptitudes to lead the individual toward greater career fulfillment in keeping with one's own goals. This literature suggests that as individuals build on and follow their own internal motivations and competencies, the individuals will "find" the right job or career.

From the organizational management of careers perspective, the predominant focus on individual career management has taken a behavioral perspective (see Sullivan, 1999 for an excellent review of this literature). As early as the late 1970's the career literature addressed the importance of "the interaction of the individual and the organization over time" (Schein, 1978). Schein (1978), discussing concepts such as the career cycle and socialization, acknowledged the importance of the larger organization as the employee takes steps to manage her career. Then, in 1982 Boyatzis urged employees to look at the fit between their individual behavioral competencies, the job's demands and the organizational environment as the employees moved towards effective job performance (McCanna, Pearse, & Zrebiec, 1994; Boyatzis, 1982). Studies emerging from the Boyatzis model suggest that both effective learning and career development will result when the employee is able to align these three components (Boyatzis, Leonard, Rhee, & Wheeler, 1996; Wheeler, 1999b). This was a beginning shift toward the second perspective of focusing on the career of the individual. While these earlier works acknowledged the importance
of the organization as a component in career development, they fall short of addressing the potential that understanding the larger external environment has on the individual's career success.

From the individual career management perspective, additional career planning literature shows the existence of various trends. First, the literature discusses the importance of career planning and fit. As we described above, the traditional approach to career planning includes an analysis of one’s professional capabilities coupled with the demands of the job and organizational fit (Boyatzis, 1982; Cashman & Reisberg, 1994; Farmer, 1987; Gati, 1998; Kiechel, 1983; Miller, 1981; Sidwell, 1981). Second, the literature suggests the techniques associated with the discipline of marketing may be successful. Here it is suggested that the job interview be approached using the same preparation and research techniques used to market a product (Brinckerhoff, 1983; Writing, 1992). Such techniques may include selling the unique features and benefits of the product. Third, the literature illustrates a rise in techniques related to career coaching and counseling. In an effort to minimize unexpected events career coaches are urged to have their clients adopt a more proactive stance where they are prepared for unexpected events and can uncover additional career opportunities (Mitchell, Levin, & Krumbolz, 1999). Fourth, the literature acknowledges the needs to establish a career planning strategy, yet the focus remains on the internal organization and the individual, with the focus on still aligning career planning and organizational fit (Moravec, 1982).

Recent discussions have begun employing the idea of being strategic in managing one's career. Mihal, Sorce, & Comte (1984) presents a descriptive process model of career decision making that accounts for conducting an information search but their model does not provide tools for analysis of the environment or of the internal resources to help manage a career
strategically. Attempts at being more strategic in career planning include using a strategic career planning approach where the individual is proactively seeking out opportunities, rather than waiting for them to surface (Ward, 1997). Further, an individual should be strategic in formulating their career planning agenda such that they have defined their marketable skills, established networking ties and negotiated a good severance package (Writing, 1992). In short, although the literature suggests the need to be strategic in career planning, the available research is significantly limited on a comprehensive approach to "strategic" career management.

We argue that an under-explored set of strategic factors needs to be considered more thoroughly when planning and making career choices. Weichrich (1982) suggested when making career decisions, individuals need to identify, evaluate and forecast potential environmental threats and opportunities to one's own career. However, he does not provide any analytical framework to guide the individual through a process in evaluating the environment. Further, the normative literature on career strategies ignores the impact of competition for limited resources within the job market. One's career is assumed to grow out of the individual's internal resources and competencies without examining the impact of rivalry within the market for positions or clients. We argue that the use of conceptual tools for strategic analysis found in the strategic management organization literature can provide insight to individuals in the process of strategic management of one's career.

We wish to elaborate and further explore the potential impact that environmental conditions may have on one's own career. We draw heavily on the strategic analysis literature of organizations and explore techniques for environmental analysis and competitive positioning within a market for goods and services. We argue that separating the broader environment into six analytical categories while using Porter's (1980) Five Forces of Industry Competition Model
for analysis of the task environment are relevant conceptual tools for an external analysis of the individual's career strategy. We further argue that analysis of an individual's strategic position in the marketplace as well as the concepts drawn from a competitive level and corporate level strategy are applicable to strategically managing one's own career. We discuss each of these in detail below.

Environmental Analysis

The strategic management literature typically distinguishes two levels of the environment, the general environment and the task environment. The general environment is typically classified into six segments: demographics, socio-cultural, economic, political-legal, technological and global (Hitt, Ireland, & Hoskisson, 1999). The general environment is typically understood as those environmental factors or forces that impact all actors within that environment, although perhaps in different ways. Weirich (1982) pointed to several of these sectors of the general environment but did not examine potential opportunities and threats growing out of it.

Changing trends in each of these general environmental segments can impact an individual's career, presenting both opportunities and threats depending on the specific nature of the environmental pressure. For example, demographic changes include the aging of the US population, the baby boomlet and the increase of women and minorities in the workforce. These demographic trends will likely create opportunities for those in some professions such as long-term care and early childhood education while creating threats to those in other occupational categories such as household servants and child care workers in private households (See Table 1., *Occupations with the Largest Job Growth, 1996-2006* and Table 2., *Occupations with the*
Largest Job Decline, 1996-2006 found at the end of the paper). Recent changes in the socio-cultural sector include greater workplace diversity, increased environmental awareness and more disillusionment with both political and commercial messages among young adults.

The continued economic expansion in the US of the 1990s has provided numerous career opportunities, especially among high skilled laborers, while the continued economic downturn in Asia has limited the ability of workers in some sectors within even the U. S. economy to flourish and keep up. In the political-legal segment, changes in regulation, especially in anti-trust regulation and its enforcement, has created enormous opportunities in telecommunication and financial services but has also intensified competitive pressures through industry consolidation and shakeout resulting in fewer employment opportunities, especially for workers in manufacturing. Innovations in telecommunications and computing have increased the demand for computer skills and related high skilled workers. Yet low skill and service workers have not been able to take advantage of these new opportunities. Increased use of robotics in manufacturing has impacted high skilled workers positively while reducing opportunities for low skilled workers being replaced by this increase in automation.

Changes in the global segment of the economy have resulted in an increased level of competition, especially in manufacturing and basic goods, while creating enormous opportunities for workers in high skilled sectors such as information, telecommunication, pharmaceuticals and American culture products. In each of these six segments of the general environment - demographic, socio-cultural, economic, political-legal, technological and global - strategic analysis of the likely impact of forecasted trends must be accomplished in order to evaluate the potential threats and opportunities they present to the individual’s choice of careers.

The task environment includes those activities and responsibilities more directly
associated within one's own profession and career choice. Within a profession or a career, an individual competes with others for employment, customers, institutional support and critical inputs such as education and work experience opportunities. The strategy literature analyzes this type of competitive environment by breaking the task environment down into five components that drive competition. Porter's (1980) Five Forces of Competition Model breaks the task environment into five fundamental categories - substitutes, new entrants, suppliers, buyers and rivalry. We argue that the use of this analytical tool has application for strategic career management as well as its more traditional use in the strategic management of organizations. We explore each of the five forces below.

**Substitutes:** The traditional career literature pays little or no attention to the threat of substitutes on the individual's career choice. For each profession or line of work, potential substitutes likely exists. Substitutes are different provider groups that perform similar functions as the focal group. For example, a midwife could be considered as a substitute for an obstetrician, paralegals in certain circumstances substitute for licensed lawyers, an HR Block tax preparer could be considered a substitute for a CPA, or a graduate teaching assistant substitute for a PhD professor in a classroom. Robotics may substitute for various types of labor such as supermarket checkout clerks, manufacturing assembly, security monitoring and some supervisory tasks. Generally speaking, substitutes place an upper bound on the price employers or clients are willing to pay for professional services. Successful strategic management of a career requires an examination of the substitutes and/or a determination to minimize that threat because of some additional value added the worker provides.

**New Entrants:** New entrants refer to those individuals who may be entering the career field or profession. A key determinant to the threat of new entrants is to the existence of barriers
to entry. Some careers or professions have very high barriers to entry such as advanced degrees, state licensing, specific skill set and financial barriers while other careers or professions have low or non-existent barriers to entry. The higher the barrier to entry, the lower the threat that new entrants will compete for your job or client base. Professions with high barriers to entry such as doctors, lawyers, nuclear physicists, or US senators typically have higher incomes and more career stability than do those professions with relatively lower barriers to entry such as manufacturing laborers, custodial staff, retail sales and office clerks. The strategic management of a career must evaluate the strength of the threat of new entrants and evaluate potential alternatives that either increase entry barriers where possible or, more likely, find a segment of the profession where entry barriers are already higher. For example, an individual pursuing a career in retail might choose to obtain a degree from a school of design and merchandising as a way to enter a segment of the profession with relatively higher entrance requirements or barriers to entry.

Suppliers: All professions and careers require critical inputs that allow the worker to accomplish her job. The critical inputs may be information, involvement in high visibility projects and/or financial resources to accomplish ones' primary responsibilities. Doctors need information about the latest techniques and pharmaceutical products. Management consultants need awareness of innovative cutting edge management techniques and exposure to high profile clients and projects. Advertising managers need market research data and creative talent. Political candidates require financial support to mount broad-based campaigns. While in many cases critical inputs that allow the worker to accomplish her task may not be difficult to obtain, a thorough strategic analysis requires awareness both of the critical inputs and their actual ease of availability. Where access to critical inputs is a problem, identification of potential alternative
sources may allow the individual to more successfully achieve her career objectives.

**Buyers:** Most careers take shape within organizations. The buyers of our career outputs are typically organizations as employer. However, in some professions such as law, medicine and management consulting, the buyer is a set of customers or clients. Regardless of who the buyer is, the relative demand for the outputs compared to the supply, or the number of competitors seeking the same position or sets of clients, determines the bargaining power that the buyers are able to exert in the hiring relationship. Another critical component in the individual-buyer relationship is the criticality of the contribution that the individual will likely provide to the organization. The more significant the contribution of the employee to the final outputs of the employing organization, the higher the potential salary, related job benefits and job security. In today's climate, the demand for computer programmers has created a situation where those qualified programmers are receiving high levels of salaries and benefits. Flight attendants and pilots have recently been able to win large concessions from airline companies due to the specificity of their skills and their critical importance to providing service to the customer. These positions and other high skilled occupations often have significant information asymmetry between the employer and employee where superiors must depend on the expertise of subordinates. As a result, these highly skilled employees are able to obtain positions that have a higher probability of fulfilling their career aspirations than low skilled employees where information asymmetry is relatively less. Any attempt at a thorough strategic analysis of a career path must take into consideration these issues of relative demand, criticality of the position and information asymmetry in order to assess the value that the individual will provide to potential buyers of her services. As a result, the relative bargaining power of the buyer vis-à-vis the individual can be determined in the relationship.
Intensity of Rivalry: The last category of the task environment is the intensity of rivalry within the career or the profession. High levels of intense rivalry for positions and/or clients characterize some career fields and professions. The rivalry within the legal profession has become much more intense; likewise the banking profession has lost much of its "gentlemanly" characteristics (Haveman, 1992). Other professions or career fields experience much less rivalry. The non-profit sector typically does not experience the same level of rivalry that we see in these other professions (cite). Rivalry is an outcome of both the competitive forces of the task environment that we've discussed above as well as the specific nature of the career path or profession. For example, the higher the barriers to entry and lower the threat of new entrants, the less intense the rivalry will be in general. Likewise, the lower the threat from buyers and suppliers, the lower the intensity of rivalry. The medical profession is a good example of this. High barriers to entry and low substitutability combined with patients having few alternatives and little bargaining power have traditionally allowed doctors to experience low levels of rivalry and high levels of professional rewards and compensation. Recent developments with the introduction of HMOs and other medical networks have increased the power of the buyer (ie. the insurance companies or HMO) which has resulted in doctors feeling the need to compete for positions within the HMO or network along with lower levels of professional rewards and compensation.

Another factor in the intensity of rivalry is the existence of exit barriers. The higher the skill level and specialized training required for the profession, the less likely members of the profession are to change careers to one where these specialized skills have limited application. The disincentive to change careers increases the level of competition for positions and/or clients within the existing career field. In general, this decreases the professional rewards or
compensation to those participating in the field. Consideration of the rivalry in the profession is the final category of the analysis of the task environment.

Our view is that a thorough strategic analysis of the external environment, both the general environment and the task environment, will allow greater insight into formulating a career strategy. We seek to add this additional analysis to the more traditional conceptualizations, recognizing that this is an interaction between both the internal resources and competencies of the individual and the external environment that will allow the individual to formulate a career strategy to meet her needs and expectations. In addition to this external analysis, we also believe that internal evaluation techniques derived from the strategy literature can be useful in analyzing the internal resources and competencies of individuals.

Internal Resources and Competencies

The normative career literature primarily focuses on discovery and development of the individual's internal resources and competencies such as her education, experience, endowments, interests, passions, aspirations, aptitudes, knowledge and skills to build a career (Boyatzis, 1982; Super, Thompson, Lindeman, Jordaan, & Myers, 1988; Konek, Kitch, & Shore, 1994; Bolles, 1999). This emphasis on internal resources and competencies at the individual level is very much in keeping with the literature on strategic management of organizations which recognizes the importance of internal resources and capabilities as sources of competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990). We seek to add an additional set of analytical categories to the analysis of these resources and competencies.

The value-added activities that an individual brings to an employer or client might be thought of as primary activities and support activities (Porter, 1985). Primary activities can be
thought of as those specific qualifications or actions required for fulfilling expectations to provide the service to the employer or client. The doctor's ability to diagnose and prescribe the appropriate medication, the lawyer's ability to execute a contract or will, the flight attendant's service capabilities in assisting passengers are all examples of primary value added activities. Support activities are those additional sets of qualifications and/or interests that enhance the individual's ability to perform the primary activities. Fundamental social skills, knowledge of industry and major trends, integrity and high ethical standards and well rounded background not necessarily related to the job demands might all be considered support activities that enhance the ability of the individual to perform her primary activities and interact with co-workers and clients. These secondary activities have long been recognized as being important in the popular career advice literature such as dressing for success (Molloy, 1988), negotiating during the interviews (Fisher, 1983) and winning friends and influencing people (Carnegie, 1937).

Our point is that these support activities enhance the ability of the individual to use effectively those resources and competencies that she brings to her primary work activities. Effective strategic management requires the analysis and use of both sets of activities in the implementation of a rewarding career.

Strategic Positioning

Another important concept in the strategic management literature is that of achieving and sustaining a competitive advantage through a strategic position. This strategic position is relative to competitors in the field and refers to how actors differ from their competitors in ways that add value or create advantage in the competitive field (Porter, 1985 & 1996; Mintzberg, Quinn, & Voyer, 1995; Stabell & Fjeldstad, 1988).
Part of establishing a strategic position is the concept of strategic intent (Prahalad & Hamel, 1989). When applied to career management, strategic intent is the marshalling of all the individual’s resources, capabilities and competencies to achieve those career goals and objectives that the individual establishes for herself. These goals and objectives are not short-term goals and objectives but the ultimate goals and objectives that the individual envisions for herself. Strategic intent includes some stretching and leveraging of existing resources and competencies to perhaps achieve more than what is initially possible. For the individual, we argue it is important that the strategic intent grows out of the values, beliefs and passions of the individual. We believe this is in keeping with the existing literature on career management and setting individual goals (Bolles, 1999; Boyatzis, Leonard, Rhee, & Wheeler, 1996).

It is important to realize however that strategic intent is the first step. In a competitive market for professional services, it is important that individuals position themselves relative to the competition in ways that announce to potential employers or clients the "value-added" that the individual brings to the market. If every prospective job applicant is endowed with the same resources and competencies, then the employer or client simply chooses based on some non-value-added criteria such as a high school friendship or family membership. If, however, the individual is capable of positioning herself somewhat differently from the competition in ways that likely add value to the potential employer, then the likelihood of that individual achieving whatever goals and objectives she has set increases.

The strategy literature recognizes two competitive positions. The two positions are the differentiated provider and the lowest cost provider. Further, the range of competitive scope of broad versus narrow can segment these positions. Figure 2. shows the resulting four strategic positions. Each of these is discussed below.
Differentiated Provider: The differentiation strategy might most easily be conceived of as that set of unique qualities or characteristics that encourages an employer to hire the individual over all the other competing candidates. A differentiation strategy requires the individual to bundle some set of resources and competencies in such a way as to provide additional value to a potential employer or client. This unique bundle might consist of specialized training, significant work experience, network contacts, an interesting background, or some other set of attributes that distinguishes the candidate from the competition and adds value to the potential employer. Examples might include computer programmers with significant COBOL experience, multi-lingual flight attendants, compassionate nurses and very gifted musicians. Whatever the differentiating characteristics, the individual must be differentiated in the mind of the prospective employer or client in such a way that adds value. This additional value may be in the form of more a pleasant work environment, additional benefits to the end-use customer, enhanced firm reputation and goodwill, or some other benefit that accrues by virtue of the differentiated individual's participation.

Lowest Cost Provider: The alternative to a differentiated strategic position is to offer one's services at a lower price. If no differentiation advantage is available, then the opportunity to distinguish oneself from the competition in the job market arises from the willingness to offer services at a lower price in order to gain an advantage over the competition. For many, this may be a viable choice given restrictions or limitations due to experience, educational opportunities, or other commitments. The point here is that if an individual cannot be differentiated from the
rest of the competition, then the only way to be set a part from the competition is to be a low cost provider. A stark example of this arises when non-unionized workers are willing to work for lower pay in part-time positions. The alternative is to be one of many applicants and to trust fate or chance to provide an opportunity.

Many will choose this option in particular at the beginning of their careers or when trying to make a career shift. Examples of this might include non-paid or low paying internships, co-op educational programs, on the job training programs, or even welfare to work type programs. Gaining experience and expertise even while on the job typically will allow the individual the opportunity to develop differentiation characteristics that can then be leveraged for a competitive advantage in the future. There may be some individuals who choose to pursue a consistent low cost provider strategy in exchange for job security and minimal career investment activities. The mill worker or office clerk may choose to offer their services at the lower price in order to fulfill non-career related goals and objectives such as increasing family time, leisure and/or hobbies.

**Competitive Scope:** We have discussed job and labor markets and the competition inherent in those markets as though they are homogenous. In fact, labor and career markets are segmented and stratified along multiple dimensions (Sonnenfeld, Peiperl, & Kotter, 1988; Reich, 1991). When we compete for jobs or career opportunities, we do not compete with everyone everywhere. We typically compete with a subset that may be delineated by education, experience, geography, industry, as well as many other dimensions. In choosing a strategic position, we may also make choices about which competitive segments we choose to place ourselves.

Some individuals may choose to compete broadly across a wide number of segments while others may choose to compete much more narrowly, whether by industry, geography, or
some other delineation. Some architects may choose to work for large corporate practices in major urban centers while their classmates may choose to practice back in their hometown. Some nurses may be willing to relocate for high paying jobs while others wish to remain in a specific local setting, regardless of salary and other benefit inducements. Some IT managers may want to remain within an industry while others are more willing to move across multiple industries. Each of these examples reflects the choices of competitive scope in which individuals make choices about offering their services to satisfy individual career objectives. These competitive scope decisions may change over time but they are an important component of a thorough analysis of the considerations necessary to strategic career management.

Trade-Offs: An important consideration in the analysis of strategic career position is the evaluation of alternatives one may choose for achieving her objectives. Inherent in this analysis is the requirement that alternatives require choice. The individual in staking out a strategic position must choose between alternatives and in the process, reject any inappropriate options. The essence of strategy is trade-offs (Porter, 1996). Strategy is not only deciding what to do, it is also deciding what not to do. The effective management of a career requires making trade-offs, making choices and deciding not only what to do but also what NOT to do.

Putting the Pieces Together

Given the strategic analysis of individual resources, dynamic environmental changes and strategic position, the next major task of the strategic career management process is integrating the internal competencies with the external environment into a coherent strategic position appropriate to the individual. This requires judgement as well as the knowledge and insight provided from the strategic analysis. There likely does not exist a single best strategic position. Rather, judgement must be exercised by the individual to insure that the strategic position
leverages internal resources and capabilities in keeping with the contingencies of the competitive external forces.

And the analysis does not stop here. Strategic management of an individual’s career, just like the strategic management of a large conglomerate, requires continual on-going analysis and re-evaluation of the strategic position. External contingencies change (Anderson & Zeithaml, 1984). Technology requires the development of new skills. Changes in demographics present new opportunities. Changes in legal constraints impose new threats. Further, individuals change over time. Our interests, passions and our simple accumulated experience change with time. A strategic management process must continuously integrate these changes into the reformulation of new expanded or changed career objectives.

Integrating Career and Life

A thorough strategic management process recognizes that life is about more than career. We all have multiple demands such as "...friendship, love, leisure, knowledge, spiritual fulfillment - which the majority of us spend most of our lives contemplating, juggling and reassessing (Grant, 1995: 9)." We would like in this section to draw some insights into the management of these multiple sets of demands and commitments from the existing literature in the strategic management of organizations. The literature on organization recognizes that many organizations are involved in multiple sets of activities, and that coordinating, structuring, placing in priority, is a management problem that can be handled strategically.

Research on organizations has shown that organizations which try to overextend themselves either at different stages of the value chain, geographic expansions, or entry into too many lines of business are likely to suffer lower levels of performance (Rumelt, 1974; Markides,
1995; Hitt, Hoskisson, & Kim, 1996). Likewise, it is probably the case that as individuals become overextended, we also suffer in our abilities to achieve our objectives. In the discussion below, we draw on key concepts from the strategic management of organization literature to argue for a guiding set of principles to help us manage our multiple activities in such a way as to maximize our overall life goals.

**Integration:** Individuals that are able to integrate skills sets, knowledge and routines into a variety of personal settings are more likely to able not only to reinforce those skill sets and routines but also more likely to enjoy the benefits in the multiple settings (Wheeler, 1999a, b). For example, developing a management style for self-directed teams at work might very well translate into enhanced dinner-time conversation with family members about the family vacation or getting the housework done. Enhanced communication skills with the teenager might very well translate enhanced motivation for the subordinates in the workplace. The application of professional skills in volunteer community associations provides another opportunity in a different setting for leveraging and enhancing important personal resources and skills (Wheeler, 1999a, b).

**Geographic Context:** Just as the literature on organizations demonstrates the difficulties of operating in diverse geographical locations (Hitt, Hoskisson, & Kim, 1996; Inkpen & Beamish, 1997; Park & Ungson, 1997), so geographic context can enhance or constrain our ability to meet our life objectives. Geographic over extension entails additional sets of costs in terms of time, opportunity, energy and overt financial outlays for commuting which then also decrease time spent with family, friends, colleagues, social connections, not to mention the emotional and mental stress of navigating congested highways and airports. Unless this commuting time and costs can be put to some other productive use, a strategic awareness of
geographic issues requires careful thought and trade-offs to avoid becoming overextended.

Research in organization demonstrates the advantage of "clustering" geographically as a way of enhancing and expanding the capabilities of those within the cluster (Krugman, 1991; Porter, 1990). A portion of this benefit has been demonstrated to flow from the social interaction of individuals outside of work. Likewise, this social interaction of colleagues within similar industries, professions, or other life situations likely enhances opportunities as well as awareness and professional skill sets that then able to be leveraged in the work setting (Wheeler, 1999a, b). Social interactions including serendipitous encounters are likely to occur more frequently within geographical clusters of similar professions than outside of such geographical clusters.

Range of Activities: The literature on organizations suggests that the range of activities managers can give due attention to is limited by our constrained human abilities to focus attention and process information (March & Simon, 1958), as well as the resources and capabilities of the organization. Likewise, individuals are capable of managing only a limited set of activities. Over extension and coping with too many or too disparate activities proves ineffectual and frustrating. Just as organizations should seek ways to leverage resources, share activities, or transfer skills between the different activities in which they are engaged, so individuals must find ways to be "better off" because of the range of activities rather than pulled and stretched in every direction. Can involvement in voluntary associations or religious groups enhance or reinforce values, skill sets, or knowledge that can be applied in business or family settings (Wheeler, 1999a, b)? Do professionals, contacts, or capabilities provide avenues for enhanced community or recreational activities (Wheeler, 1999a, b)? The implications of this view are that we may have to limit the kinds of and range of activities in which we are to be engaged to those which make use of and enhance our internal resources and capabilities so that
our total internal resources and competencies are enhanced rather than stretched and drained. Just as a corporation may need to forego what appears at first glance as a fun or interesting or profitable enterprise in order to “stick-to-the-knitting” (Peters & Waterman, 1982), so individuals may have to forego interesting, fun, or even profitable activities in the short term in order to achieve long term goals. The essence of strategy is trade-offs. Strategic management of career and life activities suggest that individuals need to carefully analyze and focus on the use of and enhancement of internal competencies and resources.

Conclusion

We have attempted in this discussion to build on the existing normative literature on the strategic management of careers by adding and elaborating insights drawn from the strategic management of organization literature. We have discussed the importance of recognizing the competitive nature of today’s workplace, the increased likelihood that individuals will change not just organizational settings but even change professions over the course of their work life and, the importance of taking individual responsibility for managing our careers. While we build on the literature that recognizes the importance of an individual’s internal endowments, capabilities, passions and competencies, we have added the perspective of the external environment and the competitive pressures, constraints and opportunities that lie within that environment. We have added the concept of strategic positioning, derived from the organization’s literature, as a means of bridging or transferring the individual’s competencies to that external competitive workplace environment. We argue that a thorough strategic analysis of the existing situation in which an individual operates and an awareness of the requirements of achieving a strategic position will enhance an individual’s opportunity within their own career.
We further argue that this strategic analysis and strategic management process is a continual process requiring re-evaluation throughout one's career.

We have also attempted to apply concepts from the strategic management of organizations literature to the management of multiple life activities of which the career is but one. Just as organizations operate within a variety of domains so do individuals operate in the workplace, the home and the broader community. Our attempt has been to show the application of these strategic concepts apply at the individual level, and may be useful in the achievement of a variety of career and life objectives, even as those objectives evolve through our lifetime.

While we argue that these concepts can be very useful in our thinking and management of our individual careers, empirical investigations into the application and usefulness of these constructs will enhance our knowledge and awareness of their application on an individual level. Such studies examining the impact over time will expand our understanding of both competitive processes and other external factors on career management and ways that strategic positioning within a competitive workforce can be enhanced by the leveraging and expansion of the internal resources of the individual.
Bibliography


Wheeler, J. V. (1999a). *Is it the People We Know, the Things We Do, or the Places We Go? The Impact of Social Environments on Self-Directed Change and Learning*. 1999 Academy of Management Conference, Management and Education Division, Chicago.

Wheeler, J. V. (1999b). *The Impact of Social Environments on Self-Directed Change and*

Figure 1.

A Framework for Strategic Career Management
Figure 2. Competitive Strategic Positions

Competitive Position

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Uniqueness</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Broad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation Provider</td>
<td>Low Cost Provider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrow</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Differentiation Provider</td>
<td>Focus Low Cost Provider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cashiers</td>
<td>3,146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systems analysts</td>
<td>506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General managers and top executives</td>
<td>3,210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered nurses</td>
<td>1,971</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salespersons, retail</td>
<td>4,072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truck drivers light and heavy</td>
<td>2,719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home health aides</td>
<td>495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher aides and educational assistants</td>
<td>981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing aides, orderlies, and attendants</td>
<td>1,312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receptionists and information clerks</td>
<td>1,074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers, secondary school</td>
<td>1,406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child care workers</td>
<td>830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical supervisors and man</td>
<td>1,369</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Database administrators, computer support specialists, and all other computer scientists</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing and sales worker supervisors</td>
<td>2,316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance repairers, general utility</td>
<td>1,362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food counter, fountain, and related workers</td>
<td>1,720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers, special education</td>
<td>407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer engineers</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food preparation workers</td>
<td>1,253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hand packers and packagers</td>
<td>986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guards</td>
<td>955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General office clerks</td>
<td>3,111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waiters and waitresses</td>
<td>1,957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social workers</td>
<td>585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment clerks</td>
<td>401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooks, short order and fast food</td>
<td>804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal and home care aides</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food service and lodging managers</td>
<td>589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical assistants</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 The quartile rankings are presented in the following 4 categories, each representing the appropriate quartile from high to low: 1 = very high, 2 = high, 3 = low, 4 = very low. The rankings were based on quartiles using one-fourth of total employment to define each quartile.

Table 2. Occupations With The Largest Job Decline, 1996-2006  
(Numbers in thousands of jobs)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Employment 1996</th>
<th>Employment 2006</th>
<th>Change Number</th>
<th>Change Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sewing machine operators, garment</td>
<td>453</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>-118</td>
<td>-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers</td>
<td>1,109</td>
<td>997</td>
<td>-112</td>
<td>-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookkeeping, accounting, and auditing clerks</td>
<td>2,250</td>
<td>2,147</td>
<td>-102</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typists, including word processing</td>
<td>653</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>-100</td>
<td>-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretaries, except legal and medical</td>
<td>2,881</td>
<td>2,794</td>
<td>-87</td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaners and servants, private household</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>421</td>
<td>-84</td>
<td>-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer operators, except peripheral equipment</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>-77</td>
<td>-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm workers</td>
<td>873</td>
<td>798</td>
<td>-75</td>
<td>-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duplicating, mail, and other office machine operators</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>-47</td>
<td>-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare eligibility workers and interviewers</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>-34</td>
<td>-31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textile draw-out &amp; winding machine operators &amp; tenders</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>-28</td>
<td>-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Station installers and repairers, telephone</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-27</td>
<td>-74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child care workers, private household</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>-25</td>
<td>-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspectors, testers, and graders, precision</td>
<td>634</td>
<td>610</td>
<td>-24</td>
<td>-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central office operators</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>-23</td>
<td>-47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machine tool cutting operators &amp; tenders, metal &amp; plastic</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>-22</td>
<td>-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Film strippers, printing</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-20</td>
<td>-75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peripheral computer equipment operators</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>-17</td>
<td>-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directory assistance operators</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>-16</td>
<td>-47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custom tailors and sewers</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>-15</td>
<td>-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textile machine setters and set-up operators</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>-14</td>
<td>-34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highway maintenance workers</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>-14</td>
<td>-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistical clerks</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>-13</td>
<td>-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butchers and meatcutters</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>-12</td>
<td>-6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paste-up workers</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-11</td>
<td>-75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typesetting &amp; composing machine operators &amp; tenders</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-10</td>
<td>-75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drilling &amp; boring machine tool setters &amp; set-up</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>operators, metal and plastic</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>-10</td>
<td>-22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proofreaders and copy markers</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>-10</td>
<td>-38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lathe &amp; turning machine tool setters &amp; set-up</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>operators, metal and plastic</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>-10</td>
<td>-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Payroll and timekeeping clerks</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>-10</td>
<td>-6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>