

# Work as Projects, Projects as Work: An Individual Perspective on the 'Temporarization' of Work Life

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## Abstract

A common theme in contemporary literature on work life in organizations is that change is inevitable; both the content and the context of jobs are constantly moving, and individuals have to jump from task to task, from job to job, from organization to organization. Investigating this from an individual perspective, we use career theory to analyze the biographies of two women involved in managerial careers. The first, Mrs B, has gone through a number of positions and organizations, and she tends to view all new jobs as temporary assignments ("work as projects"). The other, Dr S, has been with the same hospital since graduating, but behind that stable facade her everyday work consists of handling a number of different tasks, reforms and assignments ("projects as work"). From a traditional perspective, their work life is characterized by fragmentation and insecurity, but our interpretation is rather that they rely on integrity and guiding values in all their work. In a world of turbulence, they seek stability in themselves and their personal identities rather than in their organizational and task-related contexts. We suggest that further research on work life and careers depart from an individual perspective, studying work life as a self-reflecting process of social identity creation through which the individual seeks to make sense of himself in relation to others.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, it has become increasingly obvious that the traditional notion of the organization as a stable, visible and manageable whole is a fiction. Scholars such as Handy (1991) and Reich (1991) has pointed at that organizations are rapidly becoming facades behind which complex networks and a multitude of projects, contracting activities and bargaining processes reside. A number of metaphors have been invented to depict these new aspects of business life, e.g. "the virtual corporation"

(Davidow & Malone, 1993), "the imaginary organization" (Hedberg, 1994), "the platform organization" (Ciborra, 1996) or the "network" (Powell, 1990). Even though such concepts are often more useful as rhetorical devices than as descriptions of something truly new (Eccles, Nohria & Berkeley, 1992), they contribute to our understanding of the ongoing transformation of societies, organizations and work lives.

In this ever-changing world of complex organizing, the work life of individuals will also change in many ways (including an increased disparity on the meaning of the very concept 'work life'). Careers are less likely to be predictable or experienced within a given set of available jobs, and life-long employment within single organizations will thus be an increasingly rare phenomenon. For many, work will resemble a series of projects, of temporary positions with a certain task to accomplish (both in managerial and specialist functions, cf Lindgren, 1996b; Wählin, 1996).

Moreover, even within single organizations, work life will be more changing and unpredictable. Organizations will be involved both in complex external activities and in incessant internal renewal efforts, causing the work of individuals to be directed more towards different projects rather than the organization as a whole (cf Blomquist & Packendorff, 1996; Lundin & Söderholm, 1997; Packendorff, 1995). These new features of work life are, however, less well studied and theorized on, not least because the field of business studies is lacking the perspective of the individual on work life in general (Lindgren, 1996a; Nord & Fox, 1996).

The aim of this paper is to investigate these trends from an individual perspective, using two women's narrations about their work life as illustration. One of them is a medical doctor who has been working for the same hospital throughout her career, but is

constantly involved in a many different projects inside and outside the hospital (projects as work). The other is a CEO who has been working in numerous managerial positions in the cultural and media industries, moving between organizations, industries and countries (work as projects). From the analysis of the narrations of these two women, we stress the need for a deeper understanding of individuals' ongoing identity creation in research about careers and work life.

It should be noted that the individuals studied here are the ones that will form the core of the job market in the future; well educated, self-confident, socially competent, globally oriented people (i.e. those that Reich, 1991, refers to as "symbolic analysts"). For the rest, working life might not be as "temporarized" as described here; both in traditional industries and in the service sector, routinization and large scale production is a usual strategy to obtain competitive advantages. Our opinion is, however, that studies of well educated, career-oriented people highlights issues that are relevant (albeit not always that obvious) to other categories of working individuals.

## **2. Careers and work life: Traditional and emerging views**

In this paper is based on an interest in how modern individuals, moving inside and outside organizations, experience their work life over time. Most earlier research about individuals' experiences of work life has been centered around their need for security, social belonging and commitment in organizations (cf Herzberg, 1966; Likert, 1967; Kanter, 1972; Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Pasmore, 1988). Later studies use the term "career" to stress that these problems are not static throughout the work life of an individual, since most people change both jobs and their perception of work several times during their life (cf Schein, 1978, 1986, 1993, Driver, 1982, Sonnenfeld & Kotter, 1982, Holland, 1985). In each new situation, the individual has to create security, social belonging and commitment anew. When analyzing how individuals handle the 'temporarization' of work life, we thus need to discuss these individual needs, but also how these needs develop as the career unfolds. We recognize careers/work lives as an unfolding pattern of subjective work-related experiences that changes the identity of individuals over time.

In the field of career research there are a number of possible approaches. A basic distinction is usually made between studying career choice and career development, where the former seeks to understand how young individuals are linked into different career paths and the latter implies studies of how these career paths actually unfolds. Sonnenfeld and Kotter (1982) have identified four types of

theoretical perspectives that can be linked to this classification. The first two perspectives, social class theory and personality theory, assumes that the career choice of an individual is determined by his social background and personality. Accordingly, individuals should choose the careers for which they are best suited in terms of personality and background (cf Holland, 1985). The two other perspectives, career stages theory and life cycle theory, is usually offered as explanations to career development, and build on the assumption that the needs and contexts of individuals change over time in systematic ways. This means that as individuals grow older, their needs and preferences concerning work change in a way that also change the range of acceptable jobs; the career is not chosen once and for all, it is repeatedly chosen (cf Erikson, 1968; Schein, 1978; Driver, 1982). This kind of research (which, of course, mirrored the actual behavior of people at the time) pointed out the importance for organizations to act in a flexible way concerning individual career contracts. One example of this is that one not necessarily has to move upwards in the hierarchy to make a career; there should be 'horizontal' specialist careers beside the more vertically oriented managerial/generalist ones. Still, the norm was that individuals remained in the same organization for decades, and that they also followed quite narrow and predictable career paths.

Today, more and more people tend to view jumps between organizations as natural ingredients in a career, and they also tend to have a widened range of acceptable jobs to choose between. Moreover, these jumps occur more frequently and could take the individual across hierarchical, organizational, cultural and geographical boundaries (Sokol & Louis, 1984, Nicholson & West, 1988, Black, Mendenhall & Oddou, 1991). In investigating how individuals handle the process of changing from one job to another, Nicholson & West (1988) arrives at a transition cycle model, where the different stages involved is described. Before actually changing to a new job, the individual undergoes a process of self-evaluation and searches for opportunities. After actually being employed, he encounters the new organization and goes through a both exciting and difficult socialization process. After a while, he starts to learn how things are done at the new job, and also tries to improve routines. As time goes by, the possibilities of further improvement seems small, and the individual starts participating in other tasks than the job itself while preparing for a new change. A related line of research deals with the socialization process in itself, investigating what problems a newcomer in an organization might encounter and how these problems can be dealt with (Schein, 1971, Louis, 1981, Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992).

In a society where individuals easily change both organization and work tasks, organizations, consequently, can not rely on long-time employment and narrow career paths when designing structures and systems for training, education, mentorship etc. To complicate things even further, life within organizations is not as predictable and repetitive as it used to be for individuals. People who some decades ago could count on a certain degree of routinization and benefit from initially going through learning curves and socialization processes once and for all, now find their jobs constantly re-organized and re-engineered, their fellow workers constantly exchanged or assigned other tasks. Moreover, they are expected to participate in all sorts of working groups, board meetings, quality circles and administrative investigations beside executing the tasks for which they were originally chosen for employment (cf Handy, 1991, and his notion of the 'inverted doughnut'). Life in many organizations is in fact life in an ever-changing set of projects (Blomquist & Packendorff, 1996; Lundin, 1990; Lundin & Söderholm, 1997), implying new tasks, distinct time limits, new fellow workers with whom one has to socialize, and constant demands on learning and creative problem solving. The more complex the organization, the more complex the set of projects and, consequently, the everyday life of its members.

From the discussion above, one might ask how individuals handle this emerging reality. They are expected to change jobs often, and while occupying a job, this job is likely to change in many aspects. Are there actually some coherent patterns that can be called "a job", "a career" or "a work life"? There are some interesting research done in this area by Schein (1993) that points at that individuals actually tend to rely on some basic competences and philosophies when going through different projects, jobs, organizations, cultures etc. In a similar vein, Howard & Bray (1988) identifies different "life themes" that describes the long-term work life preferences of managers. Schein refers to these areas of the individual's self-understanding as "career anchors", by which he means something that is so central to the individual that it actually determines what jobs that are acceptable to him. The anchors listed by Schein is (1) managerial competence, (2) technical/functional competence, (3) security, (4) autonomy and independence, (5) creativity and entrepreneurship, (6) pure challenge, (7) dedication to a cause, and (8) life-style integration. Each individual has a different set of preferences in these dimensions, and the anchor of the individual is the one that will determine the choice of job in the end. These anchors emerge over time in the work life of an individual and can also become basic elements of life in general; mo-

dern individuals have to rely on something that is important for just them.

In this paper we will analyze two women's way of reasoning about their work life. Most theories in management career studies have (implicitly) been formulated out of studies of men, but there are some previous research that has actually taken gender differences into account (cf Nicholson & West, 1988 and special issues of the journal *Applied Psychology* in 1988 and 1993). These studies show that women are more interested in attachment and affiliation than e.g. achievement, that stereotypes of managers are male and not female, and that gender structures influence women's way of handling career issues. Even though the gender dimension is not central to the analysis here, it should be noted that our choice of empirical cases highlights some issues where women are usually seen as different from men. One obvious example of this is the inclination of women to describe their life as a whole rather than as a portfolio of different roles.

### **3. Work as project, project as work: Mrs B and Dr S**

In order to investigate the trends in theory and practice outlined above, two case studies of individuals were carried out. Both individuals are 50 year old women, but they differ in many aspects and were chosen as representatives of the two main trends described; work as project and project as work. Data was collected over a longer time through recurring in-depth interviews. The first interview was mainly devoted to listening, in order not to impose any theoretical framework on the interview situation. During this first session, both interviewees told us about their career and life in general, and these "stories" were then analysed out of the framework described above. In the following sessions, the interviewees were confronted with some of their own statements and also with our analysis of these statements. The relation between researchers and interviewees could thus be developed into familiarity and trust, which meant that the two women opened up their initial statements for questioning and refinement, and they were also able to articulate trends in their lives that they had not been aware of before. Both women were interviewed three times, one during a period of two years, the other during six months.

The first individual, here called Mrs B, currently holds a position as CEO of a regional broadcasting company in Sweden, and she has moved both between jobs, industries and countries during her career. She graduated from faculty of arts at her university, and her main interest was to start working at a museum. Since the interesting jobs at the big museums required years of experience, she

took an exam from an advertising school and started to work for an advertising agency. She found the agency a bit superficial and macho-oriented, and was soon recruited to produce travel services for foreign tourists. After some intense years she applied for a job as tour leader and was assigned a large hotel on Gran Canaria. She did not stay for long since she felt that the whole environment there was artificial, and the travel company gave her a job as director in an Italian seaside resort. She stayed there for four years, started and finished a marriage, and went home to Sweden with her daughter. After graduating as a teacher she started to work part-time in schools, but soon got a job as a copywriter at an advertising agency. After some years she was appointed CEO of the agency, but when the agency had to give financial support to other companies in the same group she felt that it was time to step out of her managerial role. She applied for a job as director of a local museum, and after reorganizing the museum she was recruited to become cultural director in a medium-size town. During this period, she learnt a lot about leading political organizations, and she enjoyed working with culture in society. When the largest broadcasting company in the region started to search for a new CEO, she applied, encouraged by the employees in the company. She had the same feeling about the new job as always; an initial period of enthusiasm and brave ideas, and then a period of anxiety and regret. But in the end, she now had the possibility of working creatively with culture and media, often on a national basis. She describes most of her jobs in terms of projects; she is always employed for specific reasons, and she sooner or later feels that her task is done and that it is time for her to leave and to do something else. Beside describing her work life as a series of projects, she also recognizes work as a life-long project, involving different contexts and experiences. This kind of work life is what we have termed "work as projects".

The second, Dr S, is a clinic head at a local hospital in a medium-size Swedish town, where she has spent her whole career. After graduating as a medical doctor, she became interested in working as a district medical officer and decided to work with emergency treatment for some years in order to gain experience. She remained with the emergency ward, however, and started to investigate how rehabilitation efforts could be better coordinated with emergency care. These activities are usually viewed as separate parts of hospitals, but for Dr S they had to be integrated in order to ensure good rehabilitation results. After some years, she started a dissertation project, where she was able to apply her ideas to a certain category of patients. As a graduated M.D., she became involved in teaching and further research in the same area, but she also

continued working for the same clinic as before in order not to lose touch with practical medicine and patients. In parallel to a large research project, she was involved in a series of investigations and board assignments outside the hospital, where she learnt a lot about national and international trends in medicine and health care organization. She also had to assume increased administrative duties at her home clinic, and became involved in both administrative and medical projects there while maintaining some of her external assignments. The hospital was reorganized, rebuilt and redefined, and when the economic recession started in the beginning of the 90's, she became head of the clinic. She immediately saw the need for organizational development, but she also noticed that the politicians in the county was investigating ways of downsizing the hospital structure. In parallel to a number of decentralization, rationalization and management accounting projects, she was thus also involved in the task of defending the hospital (including its emergency ward) and articulating an alternative vision for the future. As a consequence of the change projects, a number of departments were incorporated in her own clinic, and in collaboration with the new hospital CEO she tried to convince the politicians to redefine the hospital into an integrated local care center. On the surface, she has a stable long-term position and a solid administrative and academic career, but her actual description of her work life is that it has been a series of short-term assignments, issues and goals. Her stable position at the hospital is merely a facade; her daily work consists of managing different projects. This kind of work life is what we have termed "projects as work".

#### **4. Interpreting the work life of Mrs B and Dr S**

The work life stories of the two women can be interpreted in several ways. The first interpretation, which we have termed "fragmentation and insecurity", builds on the traditional insights on work design offered by organizational theorists and work psychologists (e.g Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Pasmore, 1988). From this perspective, the work life of the two women is fragmented in many ways, including such crucial aspects as identifiable and measurable goals, clearly stated mandates, job security and self-control. In social terms, the people surrounding them at work is repeatedly exchanged and their social contexts differ depending on what project, in which position or in what capacity or role they happen to be at the time.

Using this interpretation, Dr S has an advantageous situation insofar as she has a stable position and

can rely on her medical seniority and autonomy; her career-anchor is technical/functional in Schein's (1993) terms. If we look upon her work environment we can also see that she always works under the same institutionalised structures (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) where the administrative, medical and political professions form the structural prerequisites for her work. We can say that she knows the health care sector and feel at home in it. But on the other hand, her managerial position is constantly altered in a way that often lies beyond her control. When new projects and structures are to be implemented at the hospital, she is automatically involved (with or against her will), leaving her with a constant high workload and decision problems concerning what projects, conflicts and debates to devote her energy and time to.

Unlike Dr S, Mrs B has no stable professional identity to rely on, and in her main profession (manager/leader) her personality and involveness is much as important as her experiences from cultural and medial organizations. In that view we can say that she has a managerial competence (Schein, 1993). She has a high degree of control over her work situation, but at the expense of long-term job security and stable social relationships. The different positions she has held during her career has mostly been somewhat temporary by nature, e.g. leading an organization through a change process or towards a step in its long-term development. If we compare her working-environment with Dr S there are not the same institutionalised conditions governing her the whole time; she moves between different institutionalised structures. Her possibilities to feel at home are not the same as Dr S. Perhaps is this the core in her career; that she is able to work with organizations in new ways without being socialized or having a long experience of their culture.

The second interpretation, here termed "integrity and guiding values", is a recognition of the actual turbulence of modern work life and how it is handled by individuals. From this point of view, careers will almost by necessity imply time-limited positions and a multitude of changes and projects during these positions. Consequently, there can be no job security or social role stability in the traditional sense. Closer analyzed, the stories of the two women indicate that the individual must find new ways to create his/her own security and long-term social relationships, ways that can not build on the current position, the current social context or the current job-market value of past experiences. Instead, the individual can develop a social network that persist notwithstanding what job one takes or leaves, and identify a basic and explicit philosophy about work and life in general that can provide him/her with guiding values that can be

applied in most social situations (cf the Jönssonian, 1996, notion of "recipes"). They must also find ways to create swift trust (Meyerson, Weick & Kramer, 1996) with the people they happen to be working with and to be open minded concerning the further development of their careers and/or positions.

This interpretation is most obvious where Mrs B is concerned. Her guiding values through life and different work has always had an ideological core where the importance of 'educating the people' is emphasized. In most different leadership positions, she has approached her tasks with the intent that she and her colleagues in some way shall contribute to the cultural development of society. Work in the cultural sector carries with it a responsibility to link people to culture and tradition, she says, and she is convinced that most people want to learn and have cultural interests beside their daily life and work.

Even though Dr S has not been exposed to the same professional and social turbulence as have Mrs B, she has also found it necessary to develop guiding values and a personal integrity that can persist in the never-ending muddling through of everyday complexity. In almost all the different projects and investigations in which she is involved, she is thus able to apply her own health care ideology. In fact, this ideology (which emphasizes local integrated care centers as the backbone of Swedish health care in the future) offers concrete inspiration and is reflected in most of her clinical, administrative and academic work. This can also be traced in her view of leadership, with a strong emphasis on decentralization, autonomous sub-unit leaders and respect for the individual. She also views change as something necessary and thinks that neither organizational structures nor individuals should be kept for ever.

Mrs B and Dr S have also in common that they have a life-style integration. They are striving for keeping balance between family and work. In both our cases we can see that social gender structures form these women's way of describing their possibilities and view on work. Both Mrs B and Dr S are more concerned about affiliation in their work and they also tend to link private life with working life in their narrations (especially Mrs B). When they are offered work in new projects or new organizations, they incorporate life outside work in their decision. The main difference in this respect is, of course, that the kind of transitions that Mrs B undergoes from time to time has major implications for her family concerning where to live, which schools to go to etc., while Dr S has been able to keep her family in the same town and to some

extent protect them from the turbulence at her work.

### **5. The ‘temporarization’ of work life: Some implications for research on careers and work life**

This alternative interpretation offers a changed view of work and life as compared to traditional theories. The importance of organizational and social structures seems less obvious, and instead the need for flexibility and self-fulfillment cause individuals to structure their life-worlds in different ways. Many of the needs that gave rise to the traditional areas of research concerning job design, careers etc. are still there, but individuals do not any longer expect that single organizations or single social contexts should be the main providers of satisfactory solutions to these needs. That means, for example, that when the job enrichment, enlargement and development offered by the current organization or the current task environment is not perceived as satisfactory, the individual might take care of those needs by himself by changing organization or task environment. For many, it is impossible to commit themselves to the whole organization because of its complexity, and instead they choose temporary organizing processes and temporary jobs as their vehicles of self-fulfillment. That means that they have to balance between involvement in the organization and detachment from it; one has to be a good member of the organization but not at the expense of violating one’s basic guiding values. The notion of commitment will thus come to describe the individual’s relation to his long-term social network and his guiding values, rather than just his relation to the organization in which he happens to work at the time.

Viewing the organization, the project or the current job as the vehicle for self-fulfillment in accordance to guiding values also means that the organization, the project or the job must be redefined by the individual in a way that enables him to exercise and develop these values while working. Both Mrs B and Dr S did just so, the former in her different leader positions, the latter in the different temporary projects and investigations in which she was involved. Mrs B has had a number of jobs during which she was able to lead organizations towards educating and enriching people by means of culture, and Dr S has always found ways to express and advance her vision of the local care center as an alternative to large-scale specialized treatment. In other words, individuals will have to balance their own view of what the current task or job is about (derived from their guiding values) against the view of their employers (derived from organizational goals). This also implies a new view of autonomy at work; controlling one’s work

situation will also mean freedom to redefine the task or work into something that is consistent with one’s guiding values and long-term social identity. Here, the guiding values are expressed in ideological and existential terms, concrete enough to put to work, but abstract enough to be useful in different contexts.

What the above observations suggest, is that the notion of career anchors or life themes is not sufficient in reaching an understanding of how the individual develops during his work life. Career anchors is one way of describing the guiding values of individuals, but as we have seen, the work life identity of a person is too complex to be reduced into a single anchor or life theme. For organizations, this reductionism is convenient in that it offers a simplified view of how to handle employees, but from an individual perspective, the anchor or life theme is only a superficial description. For individuals that are committed and interested in their work, the work life is a source to an ongoing identity creation, where individually unique experiences continuously has to be weighed against the need for adapting and adjusting to the social context. Moreover, individuals are not likely to formulate their own identity in theoretical terms, but rather in ideological and/or existential ones. In arguing for further research in this vein, Nicholson & West (1988, ch. 10) comments that

”...overall our findings argue for a cautious interpretation of personal change. The fundamental structure of a personality is mostly unchanged and what we see are variations on the themes of individually anchored identity. In the midst of change managers find more security in their inner worlds than in the unpredictable externals of their environment.” (p. 212)

Theories on individual identity creation seems relevant in this respect, stressing individuals need for self reflection throughout their lives in order to understand and develop their identity (Hall, 1992; Nkomo & Cox, 1996; Nord & Fox, 1996). This self-reflection includes both the unique and the social human being, and is thus concerned with how the unique properties of the individual (e.g. Mrs B’s ideological stance on cultural enlightenment) can be combined with the social contexts where he/she happens to work. We can say that identity is the link between individuals’ sense-making of themselves in relation to others, which means that people define themselves in relations to their social context (Turner, 1987; Brewer, 1991). Identity creation is something going on throughout life and is formed in individuals’ own reflections and social interaction with others. It is also important to notice that this self-reflection is a process

for deeper self-understanding, and that it is not narcissistic by character. Self-reflection opens up the minds of individuals and helps them to deal with work and life in general, giving both life and work meaning and combine the individual with society.

Individuals who pursue an identity might act more unpredictable and irrational than single psychological or social factors suggest, and without an understanding for this identity, their career choice and development cannot be fully understood. This is emphasized when the individual can not rely on any single profession, occupation or position throughout his life. Moreover, since individuals tend to jump between projects and organizations, the perspective of the single organization is no longer a relevant base for empirical research. We therefore propose that future career and work life research include identity theory when investigating the work life of individuals in the 'temporarized' society.

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