

Boundaryless careers, social capital, and knowledge management: Implications for organizational performance

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Summary

The purpose of this paper is to critically assess the utilization of boundaryless careers in organizations through the lens of how they impact the formation and deployment of organizational social capital. We build a model of the positive and negative effects of boundaryless careers on social capital formation by proposing a more nuanced picture of boundaryless careers. We divide boundaryless careers into four types: internal psychological, internal enacted, external psychological and external enacted. Our model delineates the conditions under which different types of boundaryless careers affect the formation and deployment of organizational structural, relational and cognitive social capital and offer propositions based on our analysis. In addition we examine type of knowledge (exploratory or exploitative) pursued by the firm as a key moderator for the relationships we propose. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

With few exceptions, research on boundaryless careers has been at the individual level. It has emphasized their positive impact, implying that they create many developmental opportunities for individuals – and, by extension, have many benefits for organizations and industrial sectors (Cohen & Mallon, 1999). Their potential negative aspects have received considerably less attention. The purpose of this paper is to critically assess the use of boundaryless careers in organizations through the lens of how they impact organizational social capital, a critical prerequisite for organizational success in a global economy (Kogut & Zander, 1992, 1996; Kostova & Roth, 2003; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998).

We propose a theoretical model that specifies the conditions under which boundaryless careers enhance or damage social capital in organizations. We argue that important differences exist between attitudes regarding boundary-crossing and actual boundary-crossing behaviors and between internal and external organizational boundary-crossing. We put forward a typology of boundaryless careers and argue that the type of boundaryless career has consequences for the formation and utilization of organizational social capital. Organizational social capital plays a significant role in

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creating and leveraging the knowledge base of a firm (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), and knowledge has become recognized as a significant contributor to firm competitiveness (Argote, 1999; Grant, 1996; Kogut & Zander, 1992, 1996; Spender, 1996). To that end, we offer propositions regarding a key contingency factor that can moderate the desirability of the different types of boundary-crossing, namely, the type of knowledge the firm pursues for competitive success.

Our focus throughout this theory paper is on the careers of core knowledge workers, rather than the careers of the total workforce of a firm. By core knowledge workers, we refer to those who “. . . possess valuable and firm-specific human capital (that) provide the core knowledge base, which is a primary source of competitiveness” (Kang, Morris, & Snell, 2007: 243; see also Lepak & Snell, 1999, 2002). We choose this delimiter as these are the employees most necessary to creating, leveraging and utilizing the knowledge resources available to the organization. Because of the high value and high uniqueness of their human capital, these employees are most critical to accomplishing the firm’s strategic objectives (Lepak & Snell, 2002).

Boundaryless Careers

As per their original definition, boundaryless careers encompass six different meanings: they (1) involve movement across the boundaries of several employers; (2) draw validation and marketability from outside one’s present employer; (3) are sustained by external networks and information; (4) break traditional organizational assumptions about hierarchy and career advancement; (5) involve rejecting existing career opportunities for personal or family reasons; (6) are based on the interpretations of the career actor who may perceive a boundaryless future regardless of structural constraints (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996: 6). These diverse career forms have one over-reaching characteristic in common – they all represent “the opposite of ‘organizational’ careers – careers conceived to unfold in a single employment setting” (Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996: 5).

Boundaryless careers are viewed as the personal property of individuals (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Many see the role of organizations as limited to providing employees with challenging assignments, professional education, information and other developmental resources (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 2004). Individuals are driven by their own personal definition of success (see related work on Protean careers and psychological success by Hall and colleagues, e.g., Hall, 1976, 1996, 2004; Hall & Mirvis, 1996) They amass career capital (Inkson & Arthur, 2001) through choosing projects that allow them to accumulate diverse knowledge, develop extensive professional networks, and maintain high visibility. Getting the highest return on career capital often necessitates the crossing of one or more boundaries (divisional, organizational, occupational, national, etc.) (Brousseau, Driver, Eneroth, & Larsson, 1996; Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Rousseau & Wade-Benzoni, 1995).

There are three important limitations of the boundaryless career literature. First, several recent exceptions notwithstanding (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Briscoe, Hall, & Frautschy DeMuth, 2006; Greenhaus, Callanan, & DiRenzo, forthcoming; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006), research has largely conceptualized boundaryless careers as sharing a single definition. Second, there has been very limited consideration of their impact on organizations (Becker & Haunschild, 2003). Third, there has been a marked emphasis on their positive influence with only a few authors adopting a more cautious tone (Baker & Aldrich, 1996; Brousseau et al., 1996; Dany, 2003; Hirsch & Shanley, 1996; King, 2004; Marler, Barringer, & Milkovich, 2002; Nicholson, 1996; Peel & Inkson, 2004; Pringle & Mallon, 2003; Sommerlund & Boutaiba, 2007). In this paper we aim to address these limitations by building a model that differentiates between four types of boundaryless careers and discussing how each type impacts (positively or negatively) organizational effectiveness through the mechanism of social capital.

The faces of boundaryless careers

Although boundaryless careers were originally conceptualized to transcend various boundaries and levels of analysis – “physical and psychological, objective and subjective” (Briscoe & Hall, 2006: 6), in the decade following the introduction of the construct, research focused primarily on the objective component, interpreting boundaryless careers as multiple moves across several organizations (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). In essence, boundaryless careers have become synonymous to inter-organizational careers (e.g., Yamamoto, 2006). This trend is likely due to a combination of methodological considerations (compared to other boundaryless career meanings, organizational mobility is the easiest to capture), the exact wording of its original definition, and the most common examples of boundaryless careers (IT professionals, film crews and the like, whose career paths involve frequent organizational boundary-crossing; Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Briscoe et al., 2006; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006).

The emphasis on inter-organizational mobility has led to concerns about the oversimplification of the boundaryless career construct and to calls for reinstating its versatility (e.g., Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Briscoe et al., 2006; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). Thus, Arthur et al. (2005) note that in addition to inter-organizational mobility, boundaryless careers also involve “the *opportunity* for inter-organizational mobility rather than explicit changes of employer” (p181, emphasis in the original). More recently, Sullivan and Arthur (2006) suggest that boundaryless careers are characterized by two basic types of mobility, each measured on a continuum – physical mobility (the transition across boundaries) and psychological mobility (receptivity and perceived capacity to cross boundaries). In a related publication, Briscoe et al. (2006) assess boundaryless careers through two dimensions: boundaryless mindset, or one’s general attitude to working across organizational boundaries, and organizational mobility preference, or the strength of interest in remaining with a single (or multiple) employer(s). While boundaryless mindset and organizational mobility preference reflect Sullivan and Arthur’s (2006) psychological and physical mobility, respectively, both dimensions put forward by Briscoe et al. (2006) are attitudinal. On the other hand, Greenhaus et al. (forthcoming) propose a shift away from psychological mobility (a facet they believe is best captured by personal characteristics and constructs such as the protean career orientation) in favor of conceptualizing the boundaryless career on a continuum of nontraditional physical mobility.

Although recent research outlined above has greatly contributed to clarifying the construct, further refinement and a more comprehensive theoretical model are needed. To remain true to the original conceptualization of boundaryless careers and maintain the theoretical richness of the construct, both psychological and physical mobility should be preserved. Yet research should clearly acknowledge that there is a categorical distinction between these facets: psychological mobility is a reflection of *attitudes* (people’s evaluation of an entity, in this case, evaluation of the act of crossing boundaries) whereas physical mobility represents *behaviors* (the observable act of crossing of boundaries). It has long been established that attitudes are reliable predictors of behaviors yet they remain theoretically and practically distinct (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Bentler & Speckart, 1979; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Another important – and largely under-researched – distinction with regards to boundary-crossing, be it psychological or physical, is the type of boundary being crossed. Different career boundaries are traditionally grouped together, with an overwhelming emphasis on external organizational boundaries. Even conceptualizations of psychological mobility implicitly refer to receptivity to change employers (e.g., Arthur et al., 2005; Briscoe et al., 2006). Yet there is nothing in the original conceptualization (Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) and recent theoretical clarifications (e.g., Sullivan & Arthur, 2006) that suggests that organizational boundary crossing is a prerequisite for boundaryless careers. Differentiating between internal and external organizational boundary-crossing is of great theoretical and practical importance, and should be incorporated in a comprehensive conceptualization of the boundaryless career construct.

We propose a framework that distinguishes: (a) between attitudes and behaviors and (b) between internal and external organizational boundary-crossing. Considering these two dimensions simultaneously, four boundaryless career types can be recognized: *internal psychological* boundaryless careers, or the psychological willingness to be mobile within the boundaries of a single organization in search of increasing individual skill and knowledge sets and assignments that provide the best fit to one's current career goals; *internal enacted* boundaryless careers, or the actual movement across internal organizational departments, functions and geographical units; *external psychological* boundaryless careers, or the psychological willingness to make changes and a readiness to move to a different employer in order to increase the returns on one's human capital, and finally, *external enacted* boundaryless careers, or the actual mobility across different firms.

Unlike most previous research, this paper looks at boundaryless careers from an organizational perspective. Careers can be conceptualized at an individual and at an organizational level of analysis and research is often not clear on how these two levels are connected (Gunz & Jalland, 1996). On the one hand, the boundaryless career has been defined as an individual-level construct. This is in contrast to the traditional careers literature, which has overemphasized the organizational level and objective careers and downplayed individual career goals and individual control. However, strict demarcations between individual and organizational careers have been criticized (Cohen & Mallon, 1999). Most individuals construct their careers within organizations and their career development is strongly influenced by existing career management systems. Through their socialization and practices, organizations play an important role in shaping individual careers, even for those whose careers develop in multiple organizations. In other words, organizational career processes affect individual career processes (and vice versa) (Gunz, 1989; Herriot & Pemberton, 1996; Peel & Inkson, 2004; Sturges, Guest, Conway, & Mackenzie Davey, 2002).

At the individual level, *psychological* boundaryless careers reflect individual attitudes towards internal or external mobility, whereas *enacted* boundaryless careers refer to individual career paths that are characterized by actual intra- or inter-organizational mobility. At the organizational level, boundaryless careers refer to the predominant career type supported by the organization. Through its HR practices and the opportunity structures it creates, an organization can cultivate in its employees a mindset that can lead to a preponderance of *internal psychological* or *external psychological* boundaryless careers. The organization's staffing approaches are an important determinant of internal or external mobility within and across firms (i.e., *enacted* boundaryless careers). Although thinking of organizations as managing boundaryless careers appears counterintuitive, organizations can emulate the development of boundaryless careers (Wolfgang Mayrhofer, personal communication, November 2007).

Thus organizations that want to promote *internal psychological* boundaryless careers can create conditions that encourage internal psychological mobility without formally guaranteeing actual mobility. Examples of HR practices include selecting more "locals" (rather than "cosmopolitans," Gouldner, 1957), evaluating person-organization fit as a part of employee selection, using internal job postings extensively, maintaining a job-matching database, using seniority or other longevity pay, offering firm-specific training, organizational mentoring programs, utilizing ad hoc or cross-departmental project teams or including developing internal cadre as a performance criteria for managers and supervisors. *Internal enacted* boundaryless careers will be encouraged by active pursuit of job rotations, internal staffing of job openings, internal management succession, matching training with suitable organizational moves, transferring people across departments laterally to increase their value for themselves and for the firm, opting for initiatives like job sharing and only using layoffs as a last resort during conditions of economic uncertainty, as well as giving preference to former employees for staffing new positions after a period of downsizing. *External psychological* boundaryless careers can be promoted through selection of "cosmopolitans," providing general training and development (e.g., paying for MBA tuition), not matching company-sponsored training with promotions,

encouraging employees to remain active in professional networks and trade associations, improving access to real-time information on the industry job-market, career counseling or explicit communication that employees alone control and bear responsibility for their own careers, promising employability rather than employment security, participation in collaboration with other companies on job matching (e.g., see description of initiatives like the Talent Alliance in Lancaster, 1997). *External enacted* boundaryless careers will be dominant in organizations that rely on the external labor market for staffing on all employee levels, use seasonal or temporary workers, frequently shift between expanding and contracting employment levels in response to different economic pressures, and have a history of frequent downsizing and/or outsourcing/outplacement of organizational activities.

There are categorical differences between the four boundaryless career types that we propose. The difference between the two *internal* and the two *external* career types is larger than the differences between the *internal psychological* and the *internal enacted* boundaryless career and between the *external psychological* and the *external enacted* boundaryless career. The first is a difference of kind and the second and the third are differences of degree. For example (and reflecting the link between attitudes and behaviors – Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), practices used to advance *internal psychological* boundaryless careers are consistent with practices that can advance *internal enacted* boundaryless careers, but are quite distinct from practices that are designed to advance the two *external* career types.

Two streams of research support an argument for the link between organizational and individual levels of analysis. First, scholars have put forward several typologies of career systems and career logics in organizations (Gunz, 1988; Gunz, Jalland, & Evans, 1998; Sonnenfeld & Peiperl, 1988). The proposed frameworks allow for individual freedom of choice in the enactment of careers but also say that despite within-firm variation, there will be a modal (individual) career pattern that can be identified for each organization (or organizational unit). Second, according to role theory, the organization influences the individual through sending expectations about appropriate role behavior, defined as the “recurring actions of an individual, appropriately interrelated with the repetitive activities of others so as to yield a predictable outcome” (Katz & Kahn, 1978: 189). Thus, role expectations sent by the organization ensure fairly predictable patterns of individual behavior. Further, roles at the individual level combine to form a phenomenon at the higher level of analysis, or role structures (for a detailed discussion, see Steward, Fulmer, & Barrick, 2005).

Organizations can create and maintain several modal career patterns to accommodate different groups of employees. In particular, differences in how organizations manage the careers of core and peripheral employees have been recognized by researchers (Chambel & Castanheira, 2007; Fenwick, 2007; Kang et al., 2007). Each group can hold a distinct normative contract (Coyle-Shapiro, 2006). In this paper, we focus on the distinct modal career pattern organizations adapt towards one group of employees, those who are core to the firm’s knowledge base rather than those serving in a non-critical support capacity. In the development of our propositions our key independent variable will be an organization’s overall career management practices with regard to its core knowledge workers. While we recognize that there can be variation between individuals, we are focusing on the overall stance of the organization towards which career view it encourages its core knowledge employees to adopt (Leana & Van Buren, 1999; Rousseau, 1995).

Social Capital

Grounded in the work of Granovetter (1973), social capital refers to the assets that reside in the relationships among people that can facilitate instrumental action (Coleman, 1988; Leana & Van Buren, 1999). Inkpen and Tsang (2005) offer a more elaborate definition of organizational social

capital as “. . . the aggregate of resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or organization” (p151). We focus on the beneficial aspects of social capital for firm performance, preliminary to analyzing how boundaryless careers can affect organizational social capital.

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) distinguish between three categories of social capital: structural, relational and cognitive. In their framework, structural social capital includes the existence of linkages between employees, their configuration (including density, connectivity and hierarchy) (Krackhardt, 1992) and the degree to which they are appropriable by the actor for other purposes than for which they were created (Coleman, 1988). Relational social capital emphasizes the assets that derive from interaction with others in the network and has been described as behavioral rather than structural embeddedness. One core element of relational social capital is trust (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005), particularly the generalized trust (Leana & Van Buren, 1999) that builds up over time in others and becomes available to individuals who have not participated in the formation of a particular connection (Kostova & Roth, 2003; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Associability, the willingness to subordinate individual goals to collective goals (Leana & Van Buren, 1999), can also be included as a core facet of relational social capital. The reciprocity inherent in the concept of associability means that “. . . (a) favor for you today is made in the tacit understanding that it will be returned *someday*” (Adler & Kwon, 2002: 19, emphasis added; Putnam, 1995). Finally, cognitive social capital has been described as the “. . . resources providing shared representations, interpretations, and systems of meaning among parties” (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998: 244). Its two key dimensions are the shared goals (defined as the degree of “common understanding and approach to the achievement of network tasks and outcomes,” Inkpen & Tsang, 2005: 153) and shared culture among organizational members (the set of institutionalized norms of behavior, Inkpen & Tsang, 2005).

Broadly speaking, there are two main emphases within the literature concerning where social capital resides – at the individual or the group level. First is the view that social capital is primarily an individually generated and owned good. This view focuses on the place of a focal actor in a network (Burt, 1992; Oh, Kilduff, & Brass, 1999; Portes, 1998) and how that individual’s location in a network provides benefits of information access (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Important dimensions of this perspective include the number of ties a network member has (density), with whom, and the strength of a particular tie (i.e., how frequent and close is the contact with a tie). Very often a focal actor serves as a bridge between two people or pools of knowledge that are unknown to each other, leading to benefits for this individual (but not necessarily to benefits for his/her organization). Some looseness of connections, or gaps in the network structure, is therefore desirable in order for this bridging to occur (Burt, 1992).

The second major approach to social capital puts greater attention on the organizational level. It focuses on the cognitive and relational attributes of the ties between actors that give the collectivity cohesiveness and enable collective action (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 1995). These attributes include trust, shared norms and understandings, and goodwill (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Fukuyama, 1995; Leana & Van Buren, 1999). This collectively held social capital is often argued to be a good available to anyone in the group, regardless of whether he or she has taken an active role in creating it (i.e., it is available to even new members).

Boundaryless Careers and the Formation of Social Capital

Careers in organizations both shape and are shaped by social capital (Tempest, McKinlay, & Starkey, 2004: 1527). Given the frequent use of social contacts to obtain information about potential job

openings, structural social capital at the individual level can be critical in both job seeking and career attainment (e.g., Raider & Burt, 1996; Siebert, Kramer, & Linden, 2001). Boundaryless careers can set up a virtuous cycle whereby the requirements of boundaryless careers make it necessary for people to develop their personal networks; these networks in turn facilitate boundaryless careers, which lead to the creation of even more extensive networks, and so on.

With respect to organizations, however, the effects of boundaryless careers are much more ambiguous (Tempest et al., 2004). On the one hand, Raider and Burt (1996) argue that boundaryless careers can be viewed as a “mechanism for strategic construction of firm networks” (p. 196). Individuals who join the organization bring their structural social capital and thus provide firms access to their extended social networks which then can be leveraged by the firms. However, this structural social capital is under the control of the individual who created it. He/she can deploy it to organizational ends or not, depending on his/her motivation (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Individual mobility for the sake of boundaryless careers may also reduce an organization’s social capital. The nurturing of social capital needs a certain threshold level of stability of organizational members, as instability may “. . . undermine the ability of individuals to form meaningful relationships” (Leana & Van Buren, 1999: 544). Yet one key implication of boundaryless careers is decreased stability of organizational membership that comes as a result of high levels of voluntary turnover in search of career enhancing opportunities. This includes the psychological distancing that occurs when individuals do not actually move, but have their bags packed to take advantage of any career enhancing opportunity (Pearce & Randel, 2004). When boundaryless careers are encouraged, individuals tend to nurture structural holes that benefit their careers (Hirsch & Shanley, 1996). Moreover, they use their individual resources (e.g., time) to stay marketable rather than to build organizational social capital (Pearce & Randel, 2004). This may lead to a growing group of talented employees developing their careers between rather than within organizations, which can result in individualism, politics, and low trust behaviors (Nicholson, 1996).

In other words, existing research has proposed both positive and negative effects of boundaryless careers on organizational social capital formation. These conflicting arguments can be aligned by utilizing the more nuanced picture of boundaryless careers developed above, on which we draw to offer a series of propositions.

The differential impact of types of boundaryless careers on organizational social capital formation

With regard to social capital formation (i.e., the creation of social ties), there is a great difference among organizations that encourage employees to move across internal functional departments or geographical units and facilitate such moves (i.e., maintaining their *internal psychological* and *internal enacted* boundaryless careers), organizations where employees are socialized to think about mobility as career-enhancing, even in cases where actual turnover rates are low (i.e., encouraging *psychological* boundaryless careers) and organizations with high turnover rates (i.e., *external enacted* boundaryless careers). We argue that while internal boundaryless careers are likely to enhance all three types of organizational social capital, external boundaryless careers are likely to have detrimental impacts (see Table 1).

Internal psychological and *internal enacted* boundaryless careers are likely to have similar positive impact on organizational social capital. When thinking about moving around the organization individuals are likely to form new relationships with colleagues across departments. Such new relationships will be a natural outcome of intra-organizational transfers. Organizational structural social capital will be increased, as there will be more linkages between employees and the configuration of these linkages will be improved. The increased social cohesiveness resulting from both types of

Table 1. Differential impact of type of boundaryless careers on organizational social capital formation

Boundaryless career type	Type of social capital		
	Structural	Relational	Cognitive
Internal psychological	Weakly enhancing	Weakly enhancing	Weakly enhancing
Internal enacted	Enhancing	Enhancing	Enhancing
External psychological	Damaging to internal networks Enhancing external networks	Damaging	Damaging
External enacted	Damaging to internal networks Enhancing external networks	Very damaging	Very damaging

internal boundaryless careers will increase generalized trust and associability, thus enhancing relational social capital. In the case of *internal enacted* boundaryless careers, the trust and associability the person must develop in one unit in order to perform his/her job will need to be developed again in the new unit or function, while maintaining at least some links with colleagues from the organizational unit in which he/she was previously working, leading to an additional increase of relational social capital (Kostova & Roth, 2003). Finally, increased connectivity and/or employee transfers across departments will result in dispersion and reinforcement of similar ideas across the organization (Edstrom & Galbraith, 1977; Jaeger, 1983; Nohria & Ghoshal, 1997) and, in turn, in enhanced cognitive social capital.

Internal transfers will require employees to build new social capital for the sake of getting their work done, whereas *internal psychological* careers rely on employees taking the initiative to expand their workplace networks. Thus, we expect that *internal enacted* boundaryless careers will enhance organizational social capital to a greater degree compared to *internal psychological* careers, as they involve actual crossing of intra-organizational boundaries rather than only nurturing the intentions to do so.

Proposition 1a: Internal psychological and internal enacted boundaryless careers increase structural, relational and cognitive organizational social capital, with internal enacted boundaryless careers increasing organizational social capital more than internal psychological boundaryless careers do.

External psychological and external enacted boundaryless careers have similar – although negative – impacts on organizational social capital. Yet the ways in which they affect the formation and utilization of organizational social capital are somewhat distinct, as elaborated below. Promoting external psychological boundaryless careers can result in employees pursuing individual coping strategies such as portfolio careers. Such individualized risk management strategies can lead to opportunistic behavior (Tempest et al., 2004). In the case of structural social capital, while an individual may enhance his/her external networks in expectation of mobility, the use of these networks for the benefit of one's present employer is subject to the whim of that individual. Internal organizational networks will likely suffer from the lack of time and effort that individuals with an outward orientation put into forming and maintaining them. As noted by Leana and Van Buren (1999), "there is no guarantee that the manager with a well-developed intrafirm network will use it (and the concomitant information the network provides) to support organizational objectives" (p. 546). Similarly, Pearce and Randel (2004) found that expectations of organizational mobility were associated with lower social inclusion at work (and in turn with lower performance ratings). Organizational relational and cognitive social capital will likely also suffer from lack of investment, including emotional investment, by individuals in their organizations. While in their day-to-day work individuals

will use their ties and will contribute to generalized trust, they are less likely to contribute to the organizational asset of associability. Employees will still be motivated to contribute to specific organizational goals that may enhance their own career objectives (e.g., winning a tender, acquiring a new client, developing a new product). Yet they will also be motivated to opt out of projects with lower visibility or those for which they may have to subordinate their own goals to organizational goals and are likely to pursue only assignments that will enhance their own careers. Further, there will be less motivation to internalize the organizational norms and culture. As free agents, they have been advised to avoid overspecialization, long-term and group assignments (Hirsch, 1987; Pink, 2001). In this context, the time and commitment needed to understand, absorb and build on the organization's system of meanings and norms will be seen by individuals to be of limited returns, as they will demand too much of a firm-specific investment (Hirsch & Shanley, 1996).

External enacted boundaryless careers are also likely to be damaging to organizational social capital, more so than *external psychological* boundaryless careers. Generally, while select personal and professional relationships may remain, external moves are likely to sever many bonds between former and present employees, thus creating instability in the internal networks. External mobility may have a positive effect on the organization through increasing inter-firm coordination, if former employees help bridge the networks between two cooperating firms (Raider & Burt, 1996). But this depends on two conditions. First, whether the bridge gets built is at the discretion of people who leave. Second, it is only useful if the organizations between which employees have transitioned are in the same business or are cooperating (or a realistic potential for cooperation exists).

The organization can gain the individual structural social capital of people who join the organization and/or who replace those employees that left. However, here again the transition of individual social capital into organizational structural capital is at the discretion of the new hires (Tempest et al., 2004). Regarding the issue of employee departure, Raider and Burt (1996) point out that it can have undesirable consequences when employees take away with them exclusionary social capital such as client relations, or if they join or establish an organization operating in direct competition with the organization they left. On a similar note, Griffith and Harvey (2004) comment that organizations often acquire professional networks and expertise by hiring away from competitors but do not pay attention to networks and expertise they lose to competitors. More specifically, Broschak (2004) studied how manager mobility affected the dissolution of ties between organizations and their clients. His analyses demonstrated that market ties were embedded in networks of social relationships and that the mobility of exchange managers was associated with dissolution of these ties. Given these challenges, the potential benefit to a firm's organizational social capital from external boundaryless careers is outweighed by the loss of internal networks as people move across organizations.

Relational and cognitive social capital are also damaged by *external enacted* boundaryless careers, more so than by *external psychological* boundaryless careers. Long-term relationships are necessary for nurturing trust and norms of associability. In contrast, *external enacted* boundaryless careers may lead to "withered and estranged" organizational social capital that can thwart the incentives to cooperate and innovate (Tempest et al., 2004: 1524). A widely shared expectation of short-term employment tenure can gradually destroy trust, loyalty and mutual commitment. While formal trust can develop in organizations where *external enacted* boundaryless careers dominate, the high likelihood of external mobility will not allow for deeper, informal experiences of trust to develop and ripen (Leana & Van Buren, 1999; Tempest et al., 2004). Organizational cognitive social capital also suffers. When ties are severed the possibilities for building shared understandings and representations disappear. While the loss of a single employee – or even a few – is unlikely to damage organizational social capital, if the firm suffers a large and frequent number of departures, both trust and associability will suffer, and so will the formation of stable norms and systems of meaning.

Proposition 1b: External psychological and external enacted boundaryless careers decrease structural, relational and cognitive organizational social capital, with external enacted boundaryless careers decreasing organizational social capital more than external psychological boundaryless careers do.

The moderating impact of knowledge type

We have argued that boundaryless careers affect social capital. This relationship is important to organizations because social capital plays a crucial role in organizational performance through nurturing knowledge creation and transfer. Writers have proposed that social capital can increase an individual's willingness to share knowledge (Hansen, 1999; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Pfeffer, 1988), can improve information's quality, relevance, and timeliness (Adler & Kwon, 2002), and can help firms coordinate effectively through information sharing (Kostova & Roth, 2003; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). The resultant increased knowledge creation and transfer are key to organizational adaptation and survival (March, 1991), and ultimately to firm competitive advantage (Kogut & Zander, 1996; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Nonaka, Toyama, & Nagata, 2000).

One contingency that influences the relationship between social capital and firm performance is the type of knowledge the firm pursues. By extension, the desirability of different types of boundaryless careers is also influenced by the type of knowledge the firm most needs to leverage in order to create competitive advantage. The most common distinction within the context of organizational strategy is that between *exploitative* and *exploratory* knowledge (March, 1991). *Exploitative* knowledge builds on an existing base of knowledge to create incremental innovations relevant to current operations (Dewar & Dutton, 1986). It refers to processes such as refinement, selection, implementation and execution (March, 1991). *Exploratory* knowledge is the "...pursuit of radically new ideas and innovations, especially in highly complex or changing environments" (Kang et al., 2007). It is best represented "by terms such as search, variation, risk taking, experimentation, play, flexibility, discovery, innovation" (March, 1991: 71). Depending on the type of knowledge upon which a firm focuses, the tasks of its core knowledge workers will vary and in turn affect the kinds of social capital they will need to perform well, making this an appropriate way in which to categorize firms. Because knowledge creation and exploitation are critical to firm survival, all successful firms pursue both of these types of knowledge to some degree (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2004). Over extended periods of time, firms will put weight on one type of knowledge over the other, as can be seen by contrasting Bell Labs with Intel during the twentieth century, or examining such exploratory knowledge focused firms as Nike and McKinsey (Bontis, 1998).

We recognize that whether exploitative or exploratory knowledge is pursued may depend on the level within the organization that is examined (Gupta, Smith, & Shalley, 2006). However, in order to simplify our discussion, and drawing on Kang et al.'s (2007) framework, we utilize two streamlined organizational archetypes of knowledge sharing: organizations that focus on knowledge exploitation and organizations that focus on knowledge exploration. In addition, we focus on the sharing of tacit (as opposed to explicit) knowledge, as it is difficult to codify and transfer across the organization without extensive interpersonal contact (social capital is less relevant for explicit knowledge transfer; Hansen, Mors, & Lovas, 2005; Kogut & Zander, 1992; Miller, Zhao, & Calantone, 2006). Furthermore, tacit knowledge provides a key source for sustainable organizational advantage (Subramaniam & Venkatraman, 2001).

Our central argument in the section that follows is that firms that pursue exploitative knowledge need higher levels of organizational social capital compared to firms that emphasize exploratory knowledge. This makes *internal psychological* and *internal enacted* boundaryless careers more desirable and *external psychological* and *external enacted* boundaryless careers less desirable in the former type of firms. We will also argue that firms pursuing exploratory knowledge can find *external enacted*

boundaryless careers desirable if used to a limited degree and strategically managed, but *external psychological* boundaryless careers will be mostly detrimental.

Boundaryless careers in organizations pursuing exploitative knowledge

Pursuing exploitative knowledge is at the core of the organization's ability to refine and reinforce its existing products and services (McFadyen & Cannella, 2004). It is more certain in outcome than exploratory knowledge, and focuses on an internal search of existing pockets of knowledge and effective transfer of same in order to create valuable knowledge (Schultz, 2001). Learning is focused on the existing knowledge bases of the firm and seeks to extract greater value through incremental innovations, pertinent to current operations (Dewar & Dutton, 1986; Subramaniam & Youndt, 2005).

Knowledge exploitation is greatly aided by establishing more relationships and more intense interactions among organizational members (Miller et al., 2006; Moran, 2005; Subramaniam & Youndt, 2005). Kang et al. (2007) have recently suggested that exploitative knowledge sharing will be best served by a "cooperative relational archetype" (p. 242) which involves dense networks with strong ties (i.e., strong and frequent relationships; Granovetter, 1973) among organizational members and high generalized trust between individuals in different units based on norms of reciprocity. Because the exploitation of knowledge is drawing on already familiar information, shared cognitive schemas that facilitate knowledge combination, integration and absorption are particularly valuable.

Hansen and colleagues (Hansen, 1999; Hansen et al., 2005) have argued that research will benefit from differentiating the phases of knowledge sharing, namely, search for new knowledge and transfer of acquired knowledge. The two phases impose different requirements on organizations and are facilitated by different factors. Searching for new knowledge is facilitated by weak ties and relationships that span organizational boundaries and provide non-redundant information, whereas transfer of knowledge is facilitated by strong internal ties, especially when the knowledge being transferred is tacit (Hansen, 1999). Organizations that leverage knowledge exploitation will put a relatively weak emphasis on search for outside information and a much stronger emphasis on knowledge transfer. As such, they benefit from increasing organizational social capital by strengthening their employees' internal networks, and enhancing social cohesion and shared cognitive schemas in the organization (see also, Hardagon & Sutton, 1997; Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Kang et al., 2007).

In other words, the utilization of internal networks is extremely important to the creation of value from exploitative knowledge. As a consequence, the mindset cultivated by *internal psychological* boundaryless careers and the personnel moves initiated in accordance with *internal enacted* boundaryless careers will be beneficial to furthering exploitation of knowledge, and thus will have an overall positive impact on the firm. In contrast, *external enacted* boundaryless careers that lead to the departure of personnel and result in losses to structural, cognitive and relational social capital, will be quite detrimental to the effective functioning of organizations pursuing exploitative knowledge. *External psychological* boundaryless careers will be similarly undesirable. In terms of the stages of knowledge sharing, these careers prosper from a search of external knowledge and contacts and do not greatly benefit from a deliberate participation in internal knowledge transfer. Thus *external psychological* boundaryless careers are likely to contribute relatively little to knowledge exploitation, although they are probably less damaging than *external enacted* boundaryless careers.

Boundaryless careers in organizations pursuing exploratory knowledge

Pursuing exploratory knowledge often focuses on identifying and utilizing novel knowledge from a variety of sources extending beyond organizational boundaries. Pursuing radical innovations through exploratory learning necessitates accessing new knowledge bases, both internal and external to the firm, to incorporate into, or even replace, present firm value activities (Levinthal & March, 1993).

Internal networks with non-redundant ties and extensive external networks will thus be more beneficial for the firm. External connections allow employees access to knowledge that may have otherwise been unavailable to them (Burt, 1992, 1997; Obstfeld, 2005).

In terms of phases of knowledge sharing (Hansen et al., 2005), firms that pursue exploratory knowledge must place a strong emphasis on new knowledge search. As internal networks become stronger, external knowledge search becomes less likely. Strong ties bring comfort and similarity and result in convergence of knowledge (Hansen, 1999; Hansen et al., 2005), ultimately stifling new knowledge creation (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Leana & Van Buren, 1999; March, 1991; McFadyen & Cannella, 2004; Obstfeld, 2005). In contrast, weak ties reduce search costs and facilitate the search of new knowledge (Hansen, 1999).

Thus in firms that focus on exploratory knowledge, the structural social capital of firm members can be looser (that is, have less dense network structures) than in a knowledge exploitation environment (Burt, 2000). The benefit of creating new external structural social capital will be greater than in an exploitative knowledge environment, as new members come in with new knowledge as well as connections to previously unidentified but potentially valuable knowledge sources. This assumes that new individuals joining the organization will be willing to share their networks and knowledge.

In sum, with regard to knowledge search, organizations that pursue exploratory knowledge benefit from moderate levels of turnover and slower socialization of new organizational members. This can ensure inflow of new knowledge and sustain the diversity of individual knowledge and attitudes (March, 1991). Yet pursuing exploratory knowledge involves not only knowledge search but also knowledge transfer. Organizational performance will only be enhanced if the fresh knowledge is transferred and integrated with existing organizational knowledge. Alongside arguments about the necessity of looser networks within the organization (that benefit knowledge search), the literature has also suggested that strong relational social cohesion is important to complex tacit knowledge transfer within a firm (Hansen, 1999; Hansen et al., 2005; Moran, 2005). Tacit knowledge is most easily transferred through trusting and non-competitive relationships, in environments where individuals are willing to share their knowledge and have common understandings and shared communication frames with their co-workers (Hansen, 1999; Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Moran, 2005; Reagans & McEvily, 2003). Furthermore, firms need to create conditions that facilitate the acceptance and legitimization of new ideas. For the impact of radical breakthroughs to be optimized, they need to gain recognition, dissemination and currency (Subramaniam & Youndt, 2005). Innovations are most easily introduced to the organization by individuals with rich stocks of organizational social knowledge (Obstfeld, 2005) and are more likely to be accepted by the broader organization only where social networks are strong (Subramaniam & Youndt, 2005).

Taken together these arguments suggest that firms pursuing exploratory knowledge will benefit from somewhat loose structural capital. In addition, some depletion of cognitive social capital can be beneficial, as this allows the creation of new schemas of understanding to utilize the radical new knowledge. At the same time, however, significant levels of relational and cognitive social capital are still necessary if innovations are to be well integrated into the organizational knowledge stocks. What are the implications for utilization of boundaryless careers in firms?

Internal psychological and *internal enacted* boundaryless careers remain important in conditions of knowledge exploration although they are less important than in the case of knowledge exploitation. Increased intra-organizational networking and intra-organizational mobility is necessary to effectively socialize new organizational members and allow them to disseminate the knowledge they bring in from outside. *External psychological* boundaryless careers are still undesirable though they are less detrimental than in firms pursuing exploitative knowledge. In order to maintain their external employability, employees will be more proactive in maintaining their external networks and in new knowledge search. Their external networks may lead to new pools of knowledge valuable to the firm,

and they are unlikely to refuse to employ any new information and knowledge accessed externally. Admittedly, this can aid in the incorporation of new ideas from outside. Nevertheless, from the firm's point of view, transfers of knowledge will be dependent on the willingness and self-interest of these employees. These transfers are likely to be sporadic and random given their lower commitment to the firm's future success than those with *internal enacted* boundaryless careers. Finally, if strategically managed, *external enacted boundaryless careers* will pose little danger to firms in exploratory knowledge environments and indeed may even be beneficial to firms pursuing knowledge exploration. Kang et al. (2007) propose that the requirements of exploratory learning can be satisfied by an "entrepreneurial relational archetype." This archetype is supported by career development that "helps [employees] experience various job opportunities, beyond the boundaries of a single expertise" (p. 250). *External enacted* boundaryless careers lead to the incorporation of new members with fresh knowledge, and allow those who are no longer core employees (Hirsch & Shanley, 1996) to migrate to new firms. Indeed, industrial sectors where the exploration of knowledge is crucial (e.g., software development, film production) are often characterized by frequent employment changes – and have provided archetypical examples of desirable boundaryless careers from which both employees and employers benefit. Yet *external enacted* boundaryless careers can be encouraged only to a point. If taken too far, they can destroy the relational and cognitive social capital needed for new knowledge utilization (Figure 1).

Proposition 2a: Given their impact on social capital and the moderating influence of type of knowledge on the link between social capital and organizational performance, *internal psychological* and *internal enacted* boundaryless careers will be more beneficial to organizations that pursue knowledge exploitation than in organizations that pursue knowledge exploration.

Proposition 2b: Given their impact on social capital and the moderating influence of type of knowledge on the link between social capital and organizational performance, *external psychological* boundaryless careers will be more detrimental to organizations that pursue knowledge exploitation than to organizations that pursue knowledge exploration.

Proposition 2c: Given their impact on social capital and the moderating influence of type of knowledge on the link between social capital and organizational performance, *external enacted* boundaryless careers will be detrimental to organizations that pursue knowledge exploitation and can be somewhat beneficial to organizations that pursue knowledge exploration.

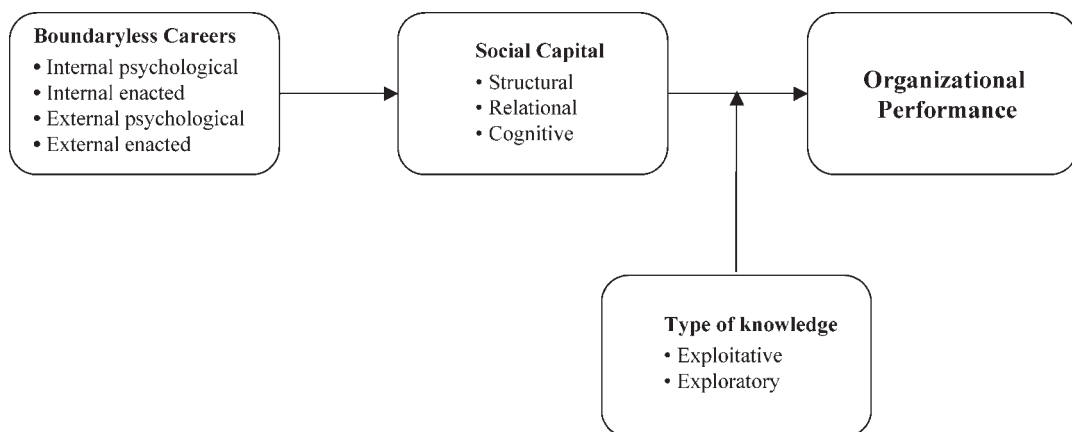


Figure 1. Relationships between boundaryless careers, social capital and organizational performance

A somewhat surprising outcome of our analysis is that whereas *external enacted* boundaryless careers are more damaging than *external psychological* boundaryless careers to the formation and utilization of social capital, they are not necessarily less desirable in terms of organizational performance. This is because when firms that pursue knowledge exploration use *external enacted* boundaryless careers strategically, the effects these careers have on social capital can lead to such benefits as access to valuable external pockets of knowledge through the hiring of new employees. The same types of benefits are not realized by *external psychological* boundaryless careers because the contacts with external sources of knowledge are driven by the individual member's desire to maintain employability, and will not necessarily produce knowledge that is valuable to the firm.

Discussion and Future Research Directions

In this paper, we analyze the role of boundaryless careers in organizations, their effect on social capital formation and their ultimate effect on firm performance. We also propose that type of knowledge the firm pursues is a crucial contingency factor that moderates the strength of the impact. The paper offers two main contributions to the field of boundaryless careers. First, past research has often put apples and oranges in the same basket, assuming that all boundaryless careers are alike. We clarify the concept by identifying and defining four categories of boundaryless careers (*internal psychological*, *internal enacted*, *external psychological*, and *external enacted*). Our goal is not to provide a list of all possible boundaryless careers paths or replace the six original boundaryless career meanings. Rather, based on two key underlying dimensions of boundaryless careers, we identify four generalized career types which draw on the original meanings but offer more flexibility. With this we aim to provide greater conceptual specificity in line with recent calls for further development of the construct (Pringle & Mallon, 2003) and propose a classification that may help future research disentangle some of the inconsistencies surrounding the construct.

Second, we bring attention to a relatively under-researched issue: the impact of boundaryless careers on organizational performance. We argue that certain types of boundaryless careers may decrease (increase) the formation of structural, relational and cognitive organizational social capital which in turn will be reflected in poorer (better) organizational performance. We also discuss that depending on whether a firm pursues knowledge exploration or exploitation, the impact of the resultant loss (gain) of social capital is likely to be more or less severe (beneficial) in terms of organizational performance and competitiveness.

The greater conceptual clarity advanced here, combined with the specification of the relationships with social capital and organizational performance, provides a solid platform for future research, both conceptual and empirical. First, it is possible that there are other mediators between boundaryless careers and organizational performance. For example, it may be that the different types of boundaryless careers produce distinct organizational cultures, or that they result in employee pools with more or less diverse knowledge and skill sets, which in turn impact organizational performance.

Second, there are a number of additional contingencies that can be investigated. For example, one important organizational characteristic to consider is organizational size, especially in relation to *external enacted* boundaryless careers. There are arguments suggesting that smaller organizations will be more negatively influenced by employee exits, but evidence also suggests that under specific conditions, larger organizations could suffer equally undesirable consequences (for more detailed discussion, see Broschak, 2004). Another promising contingency refers to the level of resource flows and interdependence between organizational units (Kostova & Roth, 2003). As interdependencies increase, the need to coordinate between multiple levels and functions in the organization make it difficult to rely on formal structures to ensure the successful flow of resources. This requires firms to

search for more informal ways of coordinating and controlling (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989), that is, organizational social capital becomes critical. Such circumstances call for the broad utilization of *internal psychological* and *internal enacted* boundaryless careers, whereas the use of *external psychological* and *external enacted* boundaryless careers is likely quite damaging. In contrast, the *external enacted* career types might not be so detrimental under conditions of low levels of interdependencies of organizational units.

Another area that future research should address is a further refinement of the definitional categories of boundaryless career we have offered in this paper and their transposition at the individual level (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). For example, the essence of *internal psychological* and *external psychological* careers at the individual level should be examined more closely. One question to consider is whether at the individual level there is a clear distinction between internal and external psychological mobility (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006): are they two separate attitudes, possibly determined by a core underlying construct such as proactive personality, or are they different expressions of the same psychological mobility attitude? Whereas organizations can design specific HR systems and practices that steer people into thinking about primarily internal or external moves, can we talk about individuals as being conditioned to prefer internal or external mobility?

The motivational aspect of mobility is a related fruitful area to investigate. For example, does it matter if the individual is thinking about moving within or out of the organization because he/she wants to or he/she has to? Recent research has suggested that boundaryless careers may be liberating for some, but feel like a burden to others who may perceive them as an unsettling loss of stability and continuity (Baker & Aldrich, 1996; Marler et al., 2002; Peel & Inkson, 2004). Differences in the motivational base for psychological mobility could, for example, influence the degree to which employees build relational social capital, specifically trust and commitment.

An examination of *external psychological* boundaryless careers seems especially relevant in view of recent labor economics research that suggests that despite the prevalent rhetoric, the actual average tenure and employment stability have not undergone dramatic changes in the last several decades (Auer & Cazes, 2000; Huff Stevens, 2005; Neumark, Polsky, & Hansen, 1999). A bandwagon of ideas seems to have been developed without clear and compelling evidence that employment stability has undergone the kind of massive shift often implied in the literature.

Social capital research also presents several key areas that need further development. First, researchers have stated that organizational social capital is formed on the basis of individual social capital yet barring a few notable exceptions (e.g., Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Kostova & Roth, 2003), they have not examined in detail the exact mechanism through which individual social capital transforms into organizational social capital. The process is not automatic. One apparently important dimension of the process is time – how long does it take for individuals to transfer their social capital to their organization and vice versa? Assessing the dynamic aspects of social capital formation is necessary in order to understand even more concretely how careers characterized by frequent moves can affect organizational social capital and, in turn, organizational performance.

Our discussion of the external boundaryless careers centers on the organizations on the “losing” end of organizational boundary-crossing, that is, organizations whose employees depart in order to develop their careers elsewhere. We recognize that organizations that are joined by new employees in search of better career development opportunities are gaining individual social capital. Yet, as we have suggested in this paper, individual structural social capital does not automatically transform into organizational social capital. Furthermore, beyond the impact of employee departure on social capital, one should also consider issues regarding the ease, timeliness, and cost of hiring good new employees. Such arguments suggest that when people change organizations, the “losing” organization loses more than what is gained by the “gaining” organization. Future research should test this issue empirically. Related to this, our discussion focuses on the social capital that exists within firms and does not take into account the

positive spillover that may occur in various inter-firm networks (for an extended discussion, see Inkpen & Tsang, 2005).

Practical implications

Our discussion of boundaryless careers suggests some important organizational implications. Boundaryless careers should be considered carefully, with a full appreciation of their benefits and disadvantages, as career management approaches have the potential to greatly influence organizational social capital and organizational performance. Rather than embrace all aspects of boundaryless careers, organizations should manage them strategically. They have to create conditions that facilitate internal psychological mobility and internal transfers, minimize undesirable external psychological mobility, and encourage optimal rates of external mobility to maintain both continuous flow of new ideas and stability that allows for the most efficient transfer of these new ideas. If conditions necessitate that companies promote *external psychological* or *external enacted* boundaryless careers (e.g., under conditions of economic instability that require organizations to maintain maximum flexibility), they are also advised to employ mechanisms to counteract the potentially negative impact of these career types. For example, while organizations should help maintain employee employability and marketability, they should first try to match employees with internal openings and communicate that the organization is taking steps to help them realize their career goals, rather than invoke the *external psychological* boundaryless career imagery at all times. To ease the negative impact of employee departures associated with *external enacted* boundaryless careers, organizations can attempt to manage actively relationships with former employees, similar to the way McKinsey & Co. maintains connections with its “alumni,” many of whom work for potential clients. Some ideas include sponsoring social events for former employees or mailing company newsletters. Such relationship building efforts may help firms retain the social capital they share with former employees (Somaya, Williamson, & Lorinkova, 2007). Another possibility is maintaining an alliance with client or partner companies in which a firm’s departing employees are given preference for new job openings in other alliance firms. Future research on organizational practice should identify other ways in which organizations can manage all types of boundaryless careers such that organizational social capital (and organizational performance) is enhanced.

Research has suggested that the key to successful knowledge sharing is a balance between internal and external networks, and weak and strong ties (Hansen, 1999; Hansen et al., 2005; McFadyen & Cannella, 2004). The organizational challenge is finding the right balance of internal and external boundaryless careers. All in all, our examination of boundaryless careers and their impact on organizational social capital and performance suggests that firms are best advised to approach career management as a negotiated process between individuals and organizations (Schein, 1996). We agree with Sturges et al. (2002) who argue that organizational career management and self career management are not mutually exclusive. They also maintain that careers are best managed by a reciprocal partnership between individuals and organizations that creates a virtuous cycle through which employees are both committed to the organization and ready to manage their own careers in ways that benefit both themselves and their employers (Sturges et al., 2002).

Conclusion

It is clear that boundaryless careers constitute a rich and important area of research for management scholars, with the potential for significant effects on the formation of organizational social capital, and ultimately, on firm performance. Establishing the veracity of the theoretical links we have proposed in

this paper is important for our further understanding of the critical components of organizational success. The paper suggests a number of ideas for future empirical work and can serve as a starting point for further theory-grounded elaborations on boundaryless careers, social capital formation, and the relationship of both these constructs to organizational performance.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the paper's editor, Terry Beehr, and two anonymous reviewers whose observations, comments and suggestions greatly helped us clarify our ideas. We are also grateful to Dave C. Thomas, Tatiana Kostova, Jorge Walter and Sebastian Reiche who provided valuable feedback on previous drafts of this paper.

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