In a narrow sense, career refers to a long-term sequence of jobs or positions within an occupation or organization that usually entails movement up a status and salary hierarchy. In a broader sense, however, career is a description of a person's life history.

DIFFERENT VIEWS OF CAREER

As the first part of the above definition indicates, many people think of career in terms of a planned advancement through a series of jobs within an occupation or organization, with the outcome being movement up a hierarchical ladder. However, as the second part of the definition suggests, others take a much more encompassing view of career as denoting an entire ‘life history’ in which the different jobs that a person undertakes to make a living may or may not relate closely to one another. Thus, while the former view emphasizes a sequence of jobs differently positioned on a ladder of hierarchical status, the latter recognizes that, for many, their career will be characterized much more by a fragmented and diverse work history. In this latter view everyone has a career - a life history - and this career may be as a housewife or a voluntary worker, not simply a career in paid work. And in the paid work sphere, while some people’s work history may conform to a narrow view of career (for example, rising from a research assistant to professor), for others it will be a different sort of experience - such as a 30-year career as a school canteen assistant.

Those advocating a broad view of career criticize the narrower definition as a middle-class and elitist concept, especially a white male concept: something that those with education, qualifications and contacts have access to a much greater extent than those with fewer educational qualifications, less-recognized skills and possibly a gender or ethnic disadvantage that may have added to the difficulties of starting and building a career.

THE END OF CAREER?

For the moment, however, most discussion continues to adopt the narrower view of career as a planned progression up a hierarchy. This is certainly implicit in much of the recent debate over whether or not we are witnessing the ‘end of career’. For writers such as Cappelli (1999) and Sennett (1998), factors such as less job security, the accelerated rate of technological change, the continued downsizing and flattening of organizations and the reduced emphasis on experience and loyalty as bases for promotion, are seen to have undermined traditional career paths. As a result, the notion of a career trajectory based on progressing through a series of jobs within a single company (and accompanied by progression up a salary and status hierarchy) is seen to have been replaced by less predictable, less secure and less continuous patterns of work. The economic and organizational environments in which this change is occurring are portrayed as turbulent and unreliable: in Sennett’s words (1998: 22), the characteristic feature of contemporary capitalism is ‘no long term’.

This assessment of the state of career, however, has been criticized as exaggerated by writers including Jacoby (1999), who argues that labour market evidence shows that long-term employment
relationships remain widespread and that, while changes in both internal and external labour markets are evident, these do not (as yet, at least) amount to the ‘end of career’ (see also Doogan, 2001, on long-term employment patterns).

It is possible to extend this critique of the end of career thesis further. First, irrespective of certain changes occurring in labour markets, people still make broad decisions about career. These decisions are affected not only by views on the changing nature of internal and external labour markets but also by broader influences such as patterns of socialization, personal abilities and character. As a result, despite some pronouncements that 'career jobs are dead' (Cappelli, 1999), the notion of career remains important to many people. It is associated with a life plan, a goal, a path of achievement or a yardstick; for many this relates closely to their sense of identity and self-worth. These associations remain important even if the environments in which careers are pursued are less conducive than hitherto.

Second, the end of career argument also tends to overemphasize the availability and stability of careers in the past. It implies adherence to a narrow view of career (upward, predictable, hierarchical ascent). But for many, as noted above, their career - their work history - has always been characterized by insecurity, a lack of planning and a lack of control.

**HOW ARE CAREERS DEVELOPING?**

Increasingly for many, career is becoming comprised of diverse sets of work experiences with different employers rather than loyalty to a single employer. People are constructing their own careers by gaining a variety of experiences. This appears to be particularly the case in relation to early work history, as young entrants to the labour market acquire a number of different work experiences prior to taking any decisions on a more settled pattern of jobs. This contrasts with an earlier picture of seeking to gain experience and reputation within a single organization.

Career trajectories may be upward, downward or horizontal in direction. Where upward trajectories have halted, this is sometimes referred to as careers having ‘plateaued’. There may be several reasons for this, including: individuals reaching their maximum potential or ability; a preference for the work involved at a particular point in the hierarchy; the opportunity to advance being temporarily or permanently halted; the influence of events in different parts of the life course (such as childrearing); the need to gain different skills for higher positions; the influence of declining health in later years; the impact of prejudice (such as the organization's preference for younger staff); and/or a change in values, such as valuing non-work life above the status and income attaching to greater commitment to career (see Work-life Balance).

Much recent discussion has been dominated by the growth in careers among women in the labour market. The widespread increase in women's educational achievement and their growing aspirations have made the possibility of career (narrowly defined), rather than just a job, increasingly available to a much greater number of women. For working couples with children, this gives rise to issues of managing two careers and family. It is far from easy for dual-career couples to resolve the different pressures of work and home life. Elloy and Smith (2003), for example, in a study of lawyers and accountants, found that dual-career couples reported more stress, more work-family conflict and greater work overload than single-career couples.

Despite the growth in the number of women in the labour market and more than a generation of
legislation to eliminate discrimination, a limit on many women's careers - often referred to as the 'glass ceiling' - remains, with the result that women continue to be under-represented in senior positions (see Discrimination). There are various possible factors contributing to this, ranging from male prejudice to socialization: as a result of the latter, for example, many boys and girls continue to develop different expectations about their sex roles, which in turn influence career decisions. Other factors that indirectly discriminate against women's careers emphasize the way organizations are structured or how organizational cultures are socially constructed in ways that make opportunities more readily available to men (see Organizational Culture). An example of the latter is where there is an emphasis on staying on late at the office as an informal prerequisite for advancement and that many women with child-care responsibilities are less able to maintain this work pattern (see Presenteeism).

THE FUTURE

In the past, career was seen to end with retirement. However, increasing life expectancy and better health in later life, coupled with the prospects of financial shortfalls in many pension schemes and the need to fund a longer retirement period, have all contributed to a growth in post-retirement careers. A growing number of people now retire from one organization and embark on additional economic activity elsewhere. Singh and Verma (2003), for example, in a study of over 1,800 retirees in Canada found that two out of five returned to work, either part-time, full-time or as self-employed. Those most likely to return to work were ones who had previously had a high attachment to work, were more likely to have been in managerial positions and more likely to have experienced upward career mobility in their work history.

For others, however, the issue will not be extending career past normal retirement age, but the opportunity to move out of a career trajectory earlier in order to gain a different balance between work and non-work life. For some, therefore, the issue may not be the threat posed to career by short-term jobs and insecurity, but rather a more active rejection of the values that have traditionally been placed on pursuing a career, that in practice often entails progressively greater responsibilities and higher work demands.

See also:
job security, knowledge work, pay and performance, skill.

REFERENCES


https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/jobs_careers
APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA