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**CAREER COUNSELING WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS: ISOLATION OR
INTEGRATION?**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to explore how organizations give shape to career counseling. The shift from lifelong employment to lifelong employability has made career counseling an important instrument in the light of assistance to individuals in their process of self reflection and outlining a career path that matches their aspirations and competencies (Bollen et al., 2006). This study aims to examine HR-practices relating to career counseling as part of the broader career management policy. Starting from existing career typologies (e.g. Baruch, 2004), we aim to explore which processes underlie the implementation of career counseling. More specifically, we investigate whether career counseling concerns an isolated process within organizational career management, or is integrated in the overall human resource management. Using a qualitative case-study approach, this study looked at 10 organizations defined as ‘best practices’ in organizational career management, based on a prior quantitative study (Bollen et al., 2006). Semi-structured interviews were held with the HR, career or talent manager of each organization in order to explore in-depth the career counseling process. Based on our findings we built a model of how different career management practices in existing typologies are integrated into a consistent approach to career counseling. Moreover, we found that the core of the career counseling process is its interrelatedness with the performance management cycle. Our findings also revealed that career counseling within organizations is a shared responsibility between HR, line management and employees. The added value of this study lies in uncovering how career management and performance management are interwoven in reality.

Implications for practioners of this best practices analysis, limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Much of the contemporary research on careers is based on the assumption that careers can no longer be defined within the confines of one company (Mirvis & Hall, 1994). The traditional model of fulltime employment with a single employer and hierarchical progress up the corporate ladder, has given way to ‘portable’ (Kanter, 1989), ‘boundaryless’ (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) or ‘protean’ (Hall & Mirvis, 1996) careers. Even though recent research that has attempted to explore the reality of the shift from traditional towards ‘new’ career patterns, has not found clear evidence for this transformational change yet (Forrier et al., 2004; Soens et al., 2005; Sturges et al., 2000), the influences of the new career concept on organizations’ and individuals’ attitudes have to be researched (Adamson et al., 1998). For instance, central to the notion of the new career is the decline in job security, by which the psychological contract no longer reflects mutual promises of lifelong employment but of lifelong employability (Tsui et al., 1997). As a consequence, people can no longer count on their employer for job security. Instead, they have to rely on their own employability and take responsibility to further their own career and development. Scholars have described this self-reliance as “career-self-management” (Boom & Metselaer, 2001; Forrier & Sels, 2005; Sturges et al., 2000).

Recent studies have paid considerable attention to individual career management and have studied the impact of activities such as setting personal career goals and devising appropriate strategies to achieve them, on employee performance, career mobility and perception of career success (Arthur et al., 2005; De Schampelaere et al., 2004; Eby et al., 2003; Noe, 1996; Sturges et al., 2000; Sturges et al., 2005). However, despite the prevailing rhetoric of career-self-management, current research points at the need to put things in perspective. First, true proactive behavior on behalf of individuals has not yet found considerable empirical confirmation in reality (Bollen et al., 2006). Second, practicing career-self-management does not appear to be too easy a task. Some people have a very clear idea of what they want to achieve in their careers, but many others need help to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and plan their own development in a structured manner (Verbruggen et al., 2005).

For this reason, many scholars go back to Orpen's (1994) argumentation for a 'joint responsibility', where career management is shared between the individual and the employing organization. Careers are usually made within organizations and therefore career dynamics are influenced to a considerable degree by organizational factors.

As the organization constitutes the middle ground where careers are played out, it has to take its responsibility in stimulating and supporting employees' careers in order to avoid that career development becomes exclusively reserved for those employees who actively manage their careers themselves. In this regard, career counseling has become an extremely important instrument to enhance employees' employability and stimulate their career-self-management (Boom & Metselaer, 2001; Diekmeijer, 1998). In particular, career counseling assists the person in the process of self-reflection on personal strengths and weaknesses and in outlining a career path that matches his or her individual aspirations and competencies (Bollen et al., 2006; Verbruggen et al., 2005). To receive such career assistance, individuals can appeal to external, officially acknowledged centers, or turn to their own employer. A significant body of literature has dealt with assisting the former with interventions to facilitate clients' career behaviors (e.g. Dagley & Salter, 2004; Flores et al., 2003; Guindon & Richmond, 2005). Yet, few studies have investigated career counseling in organizational settings. As Sturges et al. (2000) have stated in this regard, the way to actually facilitate individual career management is frequently overlooked.

The aim of this research is to investigate how career counseling takes shape within organizations. More specifically, we seek to examine what constitutes career counseling as part of the broader career management policy. Applying a case study approach, we investigate the practices that the organization adopts to work out an internally consistent career counseling approach. This article begins by pointing at the need to take an integrated perspective to do so. The empirical findings allow us to draw up a comprehensive model that integrates career counseling with other aspects of career management on the one hand, and with other HR area practices on the other. Finally, based on a detailed study of a number of state-of-the-art career counseling systems, we will outline the critical success factors for effective in-company career counseling as well as the obstacles that practitioners may need to prepare for.

CAREER COUNSELING WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS: THE NEED FOR AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL

Before painting an accurate picture of the practice of career counseling within organizations, we need to set the context by situating it within the broader career and human resource management policies. Within the careers literature, several scholars have addressed organizational career management practices and have developed typologies based on their research (e.g. Baruch, 1996; Baruch, 1999; Baruch & Peiperl, 2000; Baruch, 2004; Gutteridge et al., 1993a). Empirical evidence shows that traditional career management practices such as job matching and development, continue to predominate the organizational career support provided in many organizations (Bollen et al., 2006; Gutteridge et al., 1993b). In particular, internal job posting, funding of participation in external training or workshops, and internal training and development programs constitute the top 3 of the most common practices (Bollen et al., 2006). With regard to career practices more particularly relating to career counseling, Bollen et al. (2006) found that more than 80% of the Flemish respondent organizations in their sample, provided career discussions with the direct manager and HR, and nearly 70% had or were launching personal development plan systems. However, more specialized career counseling instruments are not prevalent at all. The majority of organizations do not have career workshops, an internal career counseling centre or career discussions with internal or external specialized career counselors. Furthermore, specialized career counseling mainly targets fast-track management candidates or the upper hierarchical levels, but does not cover the bulk of non-high potential employees (Bollen et al., 2006). Apparently, what constitutes career counseling in today's organizations is not the provision of isolated services as those offered by external providers, but rather a specific integration of diverse career and performance management practices.

As to date, much of the literature on careers has generated wide lists of career management practices and separately elaborated on each practice in turn, whereas there is an acute lack of theoretical and empirical work that integrates the separate practices into a comprehensive framework. Baruch (1999) points at the need to combine the sets of unrelated or disassociated career management practices into a well integrated, comprehensive career management system.

Moreover, linkages between career management and initiatives in HR areas other than careers, cannot be ignored. Career studies after all, are by its very nature at the intersection of different HR fields.

The need for a close connection between the performance appraisal system and career development for instance, is emphasized by many scholars (e.g. Boswell & Boudreau, 1999; Hall et al., 1989). However, many studies restrict themselves to merely conceptual discussions and lack empirical evidence (Baruch, 1999). In addition, in the field of career counseling outcome studies have been far more common than process studies (Guindon & Richmond, 2005). Gutteridge et al. (1993b) conducted one of the few true process studies on career counseling within organizations that are available. However, given the latest trends and changes in the career landscape, it needs a reality check and update.

This study seeks to fill the above-mentioned gaps in existing research. Investigating what constitutes career counseling within organizations, allows us both to unravel the process, and to provide empirical evidence for the interconnection with other career management practices on the one hand, and performance and development practices on the other, anchored in the reality of organizations.

METHOD

A qualitative approach

The research is based on ten case studies conducted in large corporations operating in four sectors, i.e. banking and finance, consulting, chemistry and pharmacy. The use of a qualitative procedure was appropriate for three reasons. First, the case study method is the preferred research strategy when the research question refers to 'how' and 'why'. Second, when the investigator has little control over the events and third, when a contemporary phenomenon needs to be studied within a real-life context, a qualitative methodology is the most appropriate method to adopt (Yin, 2003).

A quantitative study would have restricted the research findings to what we already know and be less helpful in gaining an understanding of how specifically career counseling is given shape and integrated with the broader career management. Furthermore, the design of this study is inductive and open-ended in order to allow themes to emerge from the data (Ibarra, 1999).

In this regard, case studies are a particularly adequate method to investigate causes, processes and consequences of behavior (Yin, 2003).

Data collection

In view of our particular research interest, i.e. a study of the process and forms of career counseling within organizations and its integration within the broader organizational career management system, large-sized organizations that are considered to be 'best practices' in the field, were selected. The reason for this is that organizational size impacts positively on career opportunities and support. Compared to small or medium-sized organizations, large organizations can offer a broad range of opportunities for career development and are hence confronted with more diverging issues of careers and career policies. As a consequence, they tend to have a well-elaborated talent or career management system and a high prevalence rate of different career management practices. Working with large-sized organizations opened up the possibility of basing our integrative model on a broad scrutiny of practices and draw a full picture of career counseling, since the majority of potential instruments are present. For this reason, the cases consisted of ten large, state-of-the-art organizations operating in 4 sectors i.e. banking and finance, consultancy, chemistry and pharmacy.

The choice of participating organizations is grounded in the quantitative research of Bollen et al. (2006). Using a questionnaire among 70 companies in the four above-mentioned sectors, Bollen et al. (2006) assessed how prevalent 38 components of career management are in these companies, how extensively they are applied across the organization, who takes the initiative to make use of them and how consistently they are applied to different employee groups. Based on their findings, we selected 10 organizations that appeared to be very active in the field of career management and had implemented a wide range of practices accessible to the majority of employees. In order to take into account sector-related variations, we approached both service and manufacturing companies.

To conduct the case studies, we drew upon two sources of data: interviews and written materials. The primary method of data collection involved semi-structured interviews with the talent, career or HR manager of each company.

Regarding this approach, Baruch (1999) argues that HR professionals are judged to be best acquainted with career management practices, and are therefore the most appropriate level of analysis when studying career management practices. We asked the HR professionals about the purpose of career counseling within the organization, the different persons involved, the process and the evaluation of the process. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Furthermore, field notes were made. As an important part of the research, interview reports were sent to the interviewees for verification and feedback.

In addition to the interviews, internal written documents with regard to career counseling were collected. In particular, these documents concerned flow charts and overviews of talent and performance management cycles, self-analysis instruments like questionnaires, evaluation sheets to be filled out by line manager and employee during the evaluation/career discussion, the blueprint of personal development plans etc.

Data analysis

Data analysis was an inductive, iterative process following the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Eisenhardt, 1989; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Through constant comparison, common themes, stories and clusters of information were derived inductively. An integrative model describing career counseling and its interrelatedness with career and other HR practices, was derived from the analysis and is described in the next section.

FINDINGS

We now turn to the findings of our case study research. To achieve the purpose of drawing a full picture of what constitutes career counseling within organizations, we elaborate in turn on the purpose of career counseling, the parties involved, the process and the way in which career counseling is integrated with the broader career and human resource management, and the evaluation of the systems applied.

Purpose

The purpose of career counseling within organizations is to provide an alignment between the abilities, ambitions and motivations of employees, and the personnel requirements of the organization, the latter being dictated by business needs. Baruch (1999) refers in this respect, to the need for “external integration”, i.e. the fit between career systems and the organizational culture and strategy.

From the point of view of the organization, career counseling is an instrument of human resources planning that helps to assure steady succession and anticipate future personnel planning needs. By means of career counseling, organizations seek to orient their employees towards the job or position that delivers the greatest added value to the company.

However, at the same time, organizations need to strike a balance between individual and organizational objectives. Bringing the issue of employee motivation into the picture, and its impact on employee performance, the job has to be aligned with the career aspirations and abilities of the person, and mutually satisfactory solutions have to be found. Hence the key motivation to invest in career counseling is better individual performance – and therefore improved business outcomes – achieved by more satisfied employees. In short, career counseling allows to have the right person in the right place, which is in the interest of both individual and organization. Finally, career counseling serves the organization as retention tool, in the sense that investment in people’s careers ties them to the company and increases the likelihood of return on investment in career development.

Parties involved

Responsibility for career counseling is shared by three parties: employee, line manager and HR. Regarding the employee there is a clear consensus emerging from the career-self-management literature that employees are expected to take responsibility for their own career development. The keyword that prevailed in each of the interviews was individual initiative. However, as careers are not formed in a vacuum but within organizations, employees can rely on a supporting framework of advice, guidance and information provided by the employer.

From our cases we derived a variety of ways in which the organization can promote self-responsibility and encourage initiative, ranging from single, narrative injections in socialization programs that are free of engagement, to signing a deal that makes explicit both the employer's and the employee's responsibilities and obligations with regard to career management. It is obvious that the latter is more effective and stimulating.

As noted earlier, whereas the employee is expected to take the lead, the majority of employees do not appear to be very proactive. For this reason, in all but one of the cases, it is the line manager who is considered to be in the driving seat of career counseling. The advantages of line managers as career counselors are many. Since their relationship with the employee is very close, they can stay in touch with the employee's development and career aspirations, and are in the best position to have an accurate perception of individual performance and potential. Furthermore, the frequent interaction between employee and manager allows informal career discussions to become a regular feature of career counseling. Finally, line managers have adequate information about the opportunities in the organization, which helps to avoid unrealistic expectations and undeliverable promises.

However, in these same strengths lie the weaknesses. First, employees may be reluctant to be completely open with their manager and may avoid revealing their long term aspirations for fear of seeming uncommitted. Managers on their behalf, often feel uneasy about engaging in career discussions that may need to dig deep into personal matters, since they often do not have the skills to talk about complicated career issues. According to our HR respondents, key success factor of career counseling within organizations is hence the training and education of line management in supporting employees in identifying their career goals, strengths and weaknesses. Whereas many of them strongly acknowledge this need, the equipment of line management to be able to do so often remains the weak spot in the system. In addition, the term training covers many overtones. Many companies restrict these trainings to a general education in holding performance and career development reviews, whereas true career guidance goes far beyond that, in terms of in-depth support in self reflection and analysis. Time is a second problem respondents come across with when putting their line managers in the role of career counselor. In reality, career discussions between line manager and employee are often constrained by day-to-day demands and work pressures.

Line managers often perceive career counseling as a distraction from running their business, and informal career discussions can be skipped because of lack of time. In operational environments, this problem can be solved by giving resources to cover the absence of both first-line supervisor and operator. Another way to stimulate management commitment for their responsibility as career counselor that was revealed by our cases, is to include managers' ability to provide career counseling as a criterion in their own performance evaluation. To make this work, managers' objectives need to reflect this responsibility, their performance appraisals need to deal with it and management training needs to equip them with the right skills to be able to do it.

Finally, we elaborate on the responsibility of HR. Based on our findings, we assign a dual function to HR. First, HR needs to put in place systems and processes, and provide managers as well as employees with access to relevant sources like career workshops, development centers, training, external coaching etc. Second, HR serves as a point of contact for both line managers and employees. Regarding the former, the HR role is one of actively supporting line managers in their role of career counselor. In particular, this means equipping managers with the right skills, training them to use tools like personal development plans or self-analysis questionnaires in an appropriate way, and providing them with the necessary information on development and progression opportunities within the organization.

As far as employees are concerned, they can also turn to the HR or talent manager for discussing career issues, either on the advice of the direct supervisor or not. For instance, when the line manager lacks the skills or information required to answer the employee's career question, he or she may refer the employee to HR. On the other hand, employees can also bypass their direct supervisor and directly address HR themselves. Reasons for doing so are a lack of trust between employee and supervisor or reluctance or inability on behalf of the employee to be completely open to the manager.

To conclude, career counseling involves a three-way partnership between employee, line manager and HR professional. The key relationship is that between employee and manager, assisted by HR as facilitator and back up.

Process

Recalling our research question, the present study views career counseling not just as a single career management practice, but instead as an integrated process. In this section we consider the range of practices, processes and techniques that constitute this career counseling process and unravel the way they are designed to be internally consistent and aligned with one another. Moreover, the findings of our case study research allow us to develop an integrative model.

The core of career counseling

The cases brought out that the essence of career counseling within organizations lies in a yearly, formal appraisal or development review between manager and employee. As this formal review is obligatory, all employees are involved. Whereas this formal, yearly discussion occupies the central place in organizational career counseling, it does not mean that career counseling is being reduced to one yearly recurring moment. As noted earlier, the role of the line manager as career counselor also incorporates informal career support and developmental feedback, which turns career counseling into an ongoing communication. Next to formal and informal discussions with the manager, informal career discussions with a human resources professional take a prominent place within organizational career counseling. Contrary to the formal reviews that automatically cover the entire workforce, the employee has to take the initiative in this case.

As the content of the formal appraisal or review regards, organizations face the dilemma of combining versus separating the evaluative and developmental component. In our study, both options appear to be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, combining evaluation of past performance and future career development may prevent manager and employee to have the discussion in an open way. Employees may be reluctant to be honest about weaknesses and areas for development if they think this will damage their manager's perception of their performance. Furthermore, as many people do not have a clear idea of what they want to achieve in their career and managers tend to avoid to talk about complicated career issues, the career part may be overshadowed by the discussion about performance and reward.

Hence the formal appraisal review cannot be considered as a true opportunity for career discussion. These arguments against integrating career counseling with the appraisal review, stand in contrast to its benefit of providing a reality check. Future career development needs to be linked to past and current performance in order to set realistic objectives and make deliverable promises. Main finding with regard to our research question is, that the majority of organizations tend to combine both reviews, for reasons of (lack of) time and the inability to schedule more than one formal meeting a year between manager and employee. Evidence shows thus that career counseling within organizations is incorporated as part of the appraisal process.

For the formal appraisal reviews to be considered as true career counseling, the manager has to go beyond merely 'listening' to the outcome of the employee's self-reflection. In the role of career counselor, line management truly has to 'assist' and 'guide' employees in the self-analysis. In this regard, our case studies illustrate that assistance to prepare the formal review ranges from requiring the employee to glance at the evaluation form to be filled out, to providing employees with all kinds of vehicles for career assistance like career planner exercises, self-help questionnaires, workshops, external counseling etc., with several variants between these extremes. Organizations that restrict themselves to the first extreme, provide the employee with the least guidance possible. They run the risk that employees only prepare the evaluation part of the discussion and skip the career issues, for reasons of not being able to manage on their own, or not believing in the necessity of defining career expectations. It is clear that organizations extending career advice with the tools mentioned above, reach high-quality career counseling and closely approach the type of career guidance provided by specialized, external career counselors. However, this extensive approach does not appear to be of frequent occurrence in practice.

Having discussed the antecedents of the formal appraisal or development review, i.e. the preparation of the discussion both on behalf of the employee and the manager, we now turn to its outcome: the personal development plan (PDP). From the reality of the numerical data we see that the use of PDP's is rising sharply (Bollen et al., 2006). However, our quality research poses major questions regarding the concrete implementation of PDP's and forces us to reflect on this. The concrete implementation of PDP's encounters obstructions in two main areas: quality and follow-up. One of the major problems associated with PDP's is the narrow-mindedness of line managers regarding development.

When drawing a development plan, they tend to think in terms of traditional, classical training courses, without addressing on-the-job development initiatives such as job rotation, job enrichment, participation in projects, cross-functional or -departmental experiences etc., which may be more appropriate in view of an individual's development needs. Furthermore, line managers report to HR having problems with exactly defining these development needs. Yet, the more precise the development need can be identified, the better the proposed training or development initiatives can target that need. The second painful area that emerged from our cases, is the implementation of the development plan. Whereas in some organizations people realize at the next performance review that no concrete actions have been undertaken, elsewhere the follow-up of PDP's is formalized by quantitative measures like an 80% rate of contracted development initiatives required to be realized, or building in check points during the course of the year. In sum, the concrete implementation of PDP's as part of career counseling within organizations occurs with different levels of maturity. The role of HR in informing both managers and employees on the purpose and application of PDP's by means of info sessions, workshops, trainings etc. constitutes a crucial precondition for the PDP to be a successful career counseling tool in practice.

The periphery of career counseling

The above-mentioned formal and informal career discussions between manager or HR and employee, are at the core of career counseling within organizations and are available to all employees. But the set of instruments that organizations dispose of with regard to career counseling, is larger than that. We now bring career management practices that are situated on the periphery of career counseling into our integrative model.

First, within the scope of career management, in many organizations assessment tools like development centers, 360°feedback, self-evaluation tools etc., are additionally provided to measure employee potential. Our case studies reveal that these assessment tools can be used either before or after the formal appraisal review. In preparation to the review, it can help employees in their self-analysis. In addition to the PDP, it can help to measure the employee's abilities more precisely and identify the needs for development more sharply.

Assessment of the employee's career expectations on the one hand (self-analysis guidance and career discussions) and the employee's capabilities and potential on the other (assessment tools and development plan), is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for career counseling. Instruments within the scope of job matching and development should also be considered as components of organizational career support for employees, since preoccupation with careers needs to recognize both opportunities for vertical movement and career development support (Kraimer et al., 2006). This can also be observed in our case studies.

First, to fulfill employees' promotional expectations discussed with HR or line management, the organization needs to shape its internal labor market. Especially in a career landscape where individual career management is being promoted, our HR respondents strongly recognize the need to offer challenging prospects for advancement in order to prevent employees from leaving the company and to prevent the company from losing the return on career investment. To make clear what future positions are available, organizations rely on internal job posting and/or succession planning. However, one HR manager warned to be cautious about implementing both instruments at the same time. Succession planning may be perceived as a hidden agenda on the part of management, contradictory to the philosophy of career-self-management encouraged through internal job posting. For this reason, organizations must be careful to design internally consistent career practices and communicate consistent messages.

Second, career counseling appears to be closely tied to the HR domain of training and development, in order to equip employees with the necessary skills and abilities to make the desired career move. Development can occur in various ways. Next to traditional training courses, on-the-job-learning is gaining importance. Furthermore, career growth 'in place' serves more and more as a valid alternative to hierarchical moves. The HR managers in our study report however, that employees still adhere closely to the idea of upward progression in terms of career success. For this reason, managing lateral or temporary moves and changing the mindset of employees, is considered to be essential for the proper functioning of career counseling.

Figure 1 integrates our case study findings into an integrative model. This model reflects what constitutes career counseling within organizations, how it is integrated with the broader organizational career management and how it is intertwined with other HR domains.

Insert Figure 1 About Here

As depicted in figure 1, career discussions with line management and/or HR are at the core of in-company career counseling. Career workshops, external counseling, self-analysis tools etc. support the individual preparation of the discussion. The outcome of the formal appraisal is a personal development plan. As the formal career discussion is integrated as a component of this yearly review, career counseling and performance management cannot be seen as separate HR practices. Hence, career counseling does not involve an isolated activity. Moreover, these career discussions are integrated with a broad range of career management practices. Assessment tools are introduced into our integrative model both in preparation of and in addition to formal career reviews. Finally, initiatives within the scope of job matching and development are essential to turn the career review outcomes into concrete actions.

Process evaluation

Finally, we investigated how organizations evaluate their career counseling systems. Changing organizational and individual needs require career management to be permanently adjusted (Gutteridge et al., 1993b). Our findings reveal that HR relies both on line management and employees for evaluating their career counseling policies and practices. First, HR turns to line management to collect information about their experiences with career discussions, personal development plans etc. Second, several organizations investigate the impact of their career systems by means of an employee satisfaction survey. As in the majority of the cases career counseling is given shape within the performance management cycle, issues relating to career counseling are questioned under the performance review component.

Among the respondent organizations, the performance indicators range from general, quantitative evaluation (“how often is the section on career aspirations filled out”, “how often are career aspirations discussed in the performance review”), to detailed, qualitative analysis of each particular component of career counseling (“openness and skills of the line manager, clarity and accurateness of the objectives set, quality of the PDP, quality of the feedback and action plans, satisfaction with progression and development opportunities etc.”). However, in the majority of organizations evaluation is limited to the general way, whereas a thorough, qualitative evaluation is the essential key to complete monitoring and successful improvement and adjustment of the systems. In addition, a proper process evaluation apart from employee satisfaction surveys, is not prevalent at all. So far, despite numerous studies that emphasize the importance of process evaluation (e.g. Gutteridge et al., 1993b), the evaluation of career counseling systems appears to be underdeveloped in reality. Furthermore, since career counseling is integrated with the broader career and human resource management policies within the organization, its performance evaluation does not concern an isolated activity either, but comes under a general employee satisfaction survey.

DISCUSSION

Determining how to manage careers as a joint responsibility of employer and employee, has become a critical issue for organizations (Orpen, 1994). The ability of an organization to promote personal reflection and greater self-insight with regard to one’s career is an important yet understudied area in the careers literature. An extensive body of literature has been devoted to career counseling in the context of specialized, external counseling providers (e.g. Dagley & Salter; 2004; Flores et al., 2003; Guindon & Richmond, 2005), but the amount of empirical research into the practices adopted by organizations to support individual’s career development and self-management initiatives by active counseling is limited. It was the objective of this study to acquire insight into what constitutes career counseling within organizations. In doing so, we adopted an integrative perspective, as advocated by Baruch (1999).

As a consequence, this study goes beyond a one-sided focus on career counseling as a separate type of career management practices by both exploring how career management practices are internally consistent and aligned with one another, and looking at career counseling in conjunction with other HR practices.

Our results reveal that the core of career counseling within organizations is a formal, yearly appraisal or development review between manager and employee, complemented with informal career discussions with manager or HR professional (see Figure 1). These core career counseling practices are open to all staff. In the periphery of career counseling we found, on the one hand, instruments that support employees in self-analysis of career expectations and abilities, like career workshops, self-help questionnaires, external counseling, development centers etc. On the other, we link career counseling to job matching and development practices which should facilitate the concrete implementation of personal development plans. Contrary to what constitutes the core of career counseling, peripheral practices are not available to all staff. For instance in many companies, external career counseling or development centers are reserved for the highest management levels or high potentials. These findings are in line with the empirical findings of Bollen et al. (2006) we referred to earlier.

In short, whereas many organizations claim that they have an elaborate career counseling system available to all employees, our research shows that this ‘universal’ access is limited to formal or informal career discussions with manager or HR. Peripheral practices have not yet penetrated through to all employee levels. However, these are the practices that play a crucial role in determining the quality and impact of organizational career counseling and that are most closely related to the set of instruments and expertise provided by external, specialized career counselors. In view of the fact that the high cost of external experts prevents many organizations from providing access to external, specialized career guidance to all staff, organizations have to be equipped with a high-quality set of career counseling instruments themselves if they want to offer a valid alternative to external counseling.

In addition, even though we studied organizations that could be considered as best practices in the field of career counseling, also in these cases the core of the career counseling process revealed to have weak spots too.

Problems in this regard encompass lack of skills and buy-in on behalf of line management to properly support employees in outlining their careers, low quality and neglected follow-up of personal development plans, and lack of individual initiative whereas organizations take career-self-management for granted and base their career systems on it. This observation brings us to the consideration of guidelines for improvement. The most pressing is motivating line management and providing them with sufficient support in order to properly play their role of career counselor. Gutteridge et al. (1993b) note in this regard, that managers must be held accountable for career development and be strongly supported in this process. From the cases in our qualitative research, we derived concrete suggestions to realize this. Secondly, as far as initiative-taking is concerned, organizations should be cautious about relying on their employees. Career counseling practices that leave the initiative to the employee, such as informal career discussions with manager or HR, run the risk of not being appealed to at all. If in addition, the line manager fails to properly address the issue of career development and advancement in the formal review, a great majority of (non-proactive) employees risks to be forgotten. For this reason, organizations must be cautious about building their career counseling system on individual initiative. Many organizations however, are not aware of this problem, or do not recognize it and focus merely on their talents and managerial profiles. The added value of our study lies not only in uncovering this blind spot, but also in offering concrete ways to promote proactive behavior. We can conclude that in the current career landscape, where responsibility for career management is shared by employee and employer, organizations are going to need to dedicate more resources to career counseling to upgrade the quality of the guidance and to widen its access to all employees, with a final view to achieve the best fit between individual and organizational needs.

Managerial implications, limitations and implications for future research

Baruch (1999) stressed the need for management guidelines to help both line and HR management in facing the practical task of managing people's careers in the current boundaryless career landscape: "They need guidelines to indicate what practices can be useful and under which circumstances" (Baruch, 1999: 433).

By conducting an in-depth qualitative study in 10 state-of-the-art, large organizations, our research aims to answer this request by offering practitioners a suitable framework for career counseling rooted in different HR disciplines, by warning about potential pitfalls and by discussing the conditions that optimize concrete implementation. Thus for practitioners, the benefits of our study stem from disposing of an integrative framework as well as best practices when launching career counseling.

However, at the same time, our particular research design contains limitations that provide areas for future research. First, the findings of our study should be considered in view of the characteristics of our research sample. We studied large, state-of-the-art organizations in four sectors that appear to be 'best practices' in the field of career management. This approach urges the need to study the appearance of career counseling within other sectors, and within smaller-sized organizations having a less diverse set of career management instruments. Second, we only involved one of the three parties concerned in career counseling, i.e. HR management. Future research should also incorporate employees and line management to complete our picture of career counseling within organizations. In a next step, quantitative research could develop and test for models relating career counseling practices to outcomes at both the individual and organizational level.

Altogether, this paper has provided a basis for integrating different perspectives on careers, rooted both in career management and other HR disciplines like performance management and training and development. We hope our findings will trigger further research on related issues.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1: An integrative model for career counseling within organizations

