

## Transition management in individual organizational career planning

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to introduce the subjective perspective via the transition approach to organizational career planning so that employees' individual transition phases can be evaluated, planned and guided.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *A theoretical–conceptual analysis is conducted in this paper.*

**Findings** – *The individual perspective can be included in career planning via the transition approach. By dividing the transition into individual phases, the different requirements of employees over the course of time can be analysed individually and corresponding measures (for example coaching) can be derived.*

**Originality/value** – *The added value of this paper is that organizational career planning can individually analyse employees' transitions, using a transition approach, increasing the likelihood of a successful transition.*

**Keywords** *Change management, Career development, Transition management, Career management, Career planning, Organizational career planning*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

### 1. Introduction

Constant changes increase the number of (simultaneous) transitions to be mastered (including foreign assignments and ascents and descents in the hierarchy). The more transitions that employees have to master, the more flexible they need to become to adapt to the new conditions. These changes can lead to a variety of challenges that employees formally or informally resist.

Careers can be analyzed objectively and subjectively (Laser, 2017). The objective perspective refers to the actual structural change of position, whereas the subjective perspective focusses on how the individual perceives and values his/her career. Because transitions need to be managed by the employee, an individual and subjective consideration is necessary, which, according to the theory of continuous organizational change (Schreyögg and Noss, 2000), assumes that change is not an interruption of an equilibrium but the rule.

This paper explores the question of how the subjective perspective can be combined with organizational career planning using the transition approach. The intension is to coordinate the different, and sometimes conflicting, interests between the employee and the employer to increase the likelihood of a successful transition. For this purpose, a theoretical–conceptual analysis is performed. It first explains what is meant by transitions and then introduces a transition cycle that is congruent with the assumption of constant change. This paper presents attributes that are characteristic of work role

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transitions so that they can be included in career planning. The inclusion of these attributes is relevant because they can be used to evaluate a planned transition in relation to whether it will be successful or unsuccessful. Then, the transition approach is merged with organizational career planning. A discussion and conclusions and limitations conclude this paper.

## 2. Transitions

According to [Goodman et al. \(2006\)](#):

A transition, broadly, is any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. Transitions often require new patterns of behaviour [...]. A transition may well be a life event that involves gains as well as losses. [...] Transitions include not only obvious changes (such as high school graduation, job entry [...]) but also subtle changes (such as the loss of career aspirations [...]). Thus, an event or a non-event can be defined as a transition if it results in change. [...] A transition is not so much a matter of change as of the individual's own perception of the change. [...] a transition is a transition only if it is so defined by the person experiencing it.

As stated by [Goodman et al. \(2006\)](#), a change is not necessarily accompanied by a transition because the change must always be perceived by one person to be considered a transition. Conversely, however, no objective change can trigger a transition; for example, an expected but not-received salary increase can represent a subjective change, whereas objectively there is no change (so-called non-event transitions). Thus, not only are objective changes included in the transition concept but the subjective perception is also placed at the centre. This makes the transition concept suitable for organizational career planning because, with this concept, organizational career planning has the opportunity to analyze, plan and design transitions individually.

## 3. Transition circle

According to [Goodman et al. \(2006\)](#), people experience a three-phase cycle of transition: moving out, moving in and moving through. The affected persons do not have to pass through all the phases; they can skip phases, and the periods of the individual phases can differ:

- Moving out can be considered as the end, with those concerned facing the question of what will come next. In this phase of the process, those affected can, for example, grieve.
- When entering new situations (moving in), for example a new team, employees need to become familiar with the rules, regulations and standards of the new system. Care can be taken during the planning process to allow superiors to spend time teaching the new members what their expectations are.
- “Moving through: betwixt or between” is the third phase. During this time, employees are confronted with the question of how they can combine the new activities with other

parts of their lives and the extent to which they feel challenged. In this phase, the emotional uncertainty is reduced and their own continuity experience is strengthened.

The individual responses to the transitions are determined, for example, by the factors' transition type and timing. If the factors have been identified, attributes can be given to the phases for assessing whether a transition is promising; for instance, the attribute voluntariness can be set. Voluntary transitions are then spoken of when employees voluntarily seek and accept the transition. Instead, if employees are forced to make transitions by personal or environmental circumstances, then they are called involuntary transitions. Typical examples of voluntary transitions are an employee agreeing to a promotion, reintegration after illness or a self-inflicted change of employer. If the employee is involuntarily retired, involuntarily terminated or incapacitated because of illness, these instances classify as involuntary transitions. For individual organizational career planning, the distinction between voluntary and involuntary transitions is relevant because a voluntary transition is likely to be more successful than an involuntary transition. Other attributes, according to [Ashforth \(2001\)](#), could be, for example, magnitude, socially desirable, predictable and reversible. Further attributes could be the staff costs, the training period and the work experience, language skills and resilience of the employee. Resilience (the psychological resistance of an individual to stressful situations in life) influences individual behaviour. Resilience and the chances for a successful transition are linked to the individual resources (e.g. social skills, cognitive abilities) and the (self-) perception of the employee. That is, if the employee perceives the transition positively, for example a promotion, and his resources are adequate for the transition, then the likelihood that the transition will succeed is increased.

The attributes can be used for each transition phase to evaluate whether the transition will be successful. In doing so, the rating may change over the course of the transition; for instance, at first, the employee might just accept a forthcoming transition involuntarily, and, after coaching and the moving-out phase, it could become a voluntary transition.

This transitional cycle is a model that describes each phase in relation to each individual's challenges. The extent to which a new phase is completed successfully depends on more or less successful coping with the previous phase. Success breeds success and vice versa.

#### 4. Applying the transition approach to individual organizational career planning

The transition cycle can be linked to strategic and operational career planning, in which the term strategy is understood ([Spengler, 1999](#)) as follows:

- abstract measures, which can be varied at a later date, and
- actions that are based on global orientations and are essential for career planning.

Strategic career planning can focus on how overall business interests are affected, as it involves a variety of people, for example implementing new career models. On the other

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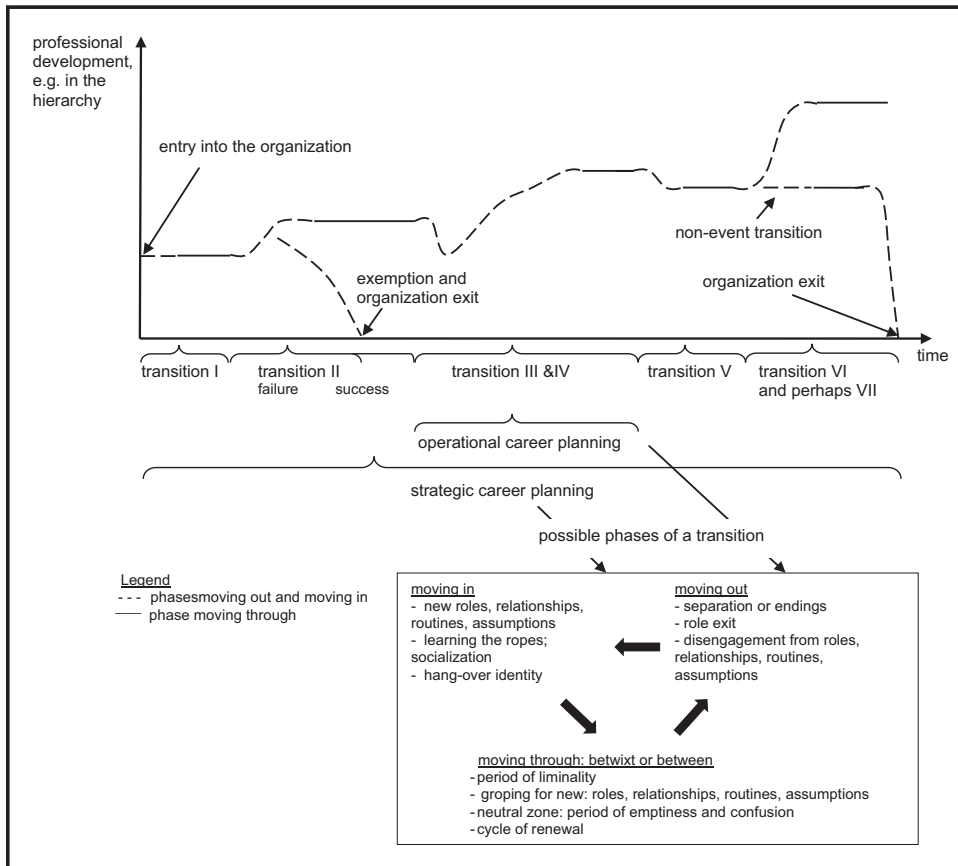
hand, strategic career planning can be based on individual career planning, which, for example, reflects the period from the entry to the departure of an employee. Strategic career planning involves gaps because not all information can be considered, but that does not mean that this information is insignificant. On the contrary, they are irreplaceable for individual career planning (for example, the respective employee goals are important for employee motivation). For this reason, the strategy is complemented by the more detailed operational career planning.

The aforementioned transition attributes can be used for strategic and operational career planning. For example, with strategic individual career planning, an employee can be scheduled to become a CEO in the next 10 years, for which he should previously have occupied different positions by means of operative individual career planning to gain relevant experience and be able to prove his suitability as a future CEO. If the measures in the strategic or operational career plan oppose the will of the employee, the probability of a failed transition increases.

In **Figure 1**, strategic career planning can be understood as the period from company entry to exit. On the other hand, operational career planning refers to concrete, individual position changes; **Figure 1** shows this as an example.

**Figure 1** also provides an overview of the course-related transition model in the context of an employee's career development. From this, it is recognizable that starting from the idea of the transition cycle, individuals are permanently in transition because after one transition the next one follows. If the premise is based on the fact that human resource management

**Figure 1** Transition process model in organizational career planning



wants to bind the employee to the company, the exit of the company (Transition II in [Figure I](#)) can be interpreted as a failed transition. On the other hand, transitions can be considered to be successful as long as they fit the goals of the organization and the employee – which may include horizontal position changes or descents in the hierarchy. For example, if the employee rises in the corporate hierarchy, then it could be a successful transition (Transition II in [Figure I](#)). Furthermore, [Figure I](#) shows that transitions take place over different periods and their effects vary. For example, in contrast to the fifth transition, the third transition is more pronounced, in that the descent in the third transition is greater than that in the fifth. At the sixth transition, two options are shown as examples: a promotion and a non-event transition. The latter is, for example, a promotion that is anticipated but not received.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

If the transition concept is introduced in organizational career planning, the different individual responses of employees to transitions can be taken into account.

With the assumption that change processes take place within individual career planning and do not allow for a stable, long-term equilibrium, such as changes in employee career goals, employee disabilities and unwanted resignations, this paper assumes that change is the norm and, therefore, organizational career planning is a process that has to adapt to the changes flexibly. The transition cycle of [Goodman et al. \(2006\)](#) is suitable because it assumes that employees are permanently in transition. This includes the phases moving out, moving in and moving through, which implies that the respective phases are mutually dependent; that is, if the moving-out phase has been completed successfully, the probability is higher – compared with a failed moving-out phase – that the moving-in phase will be mastered successfully.

Another reason for using the transition approach is that employees and their subjective perceptions are brought into focus, which recognizes that employees have to cope with the transition in their own way. It also shows that change can only be successful if it is accompanied by a transition ([Bridges and Bridges, 2016](#)).

Transitions are characterized by attributes, for example, voluntariness. These attributes are relevant to organizational career planning because they can be used to gauge the level of difficulty of the transition for employees to determine whether and when employer-side action is needed. These attributes can also be used to determine whether the transition is likely to be accepted by the employee. If it is considered that an employee is not ready for a transition, measures can be taken, such as offering coaching to increase the chances of a successful transition.

Because individuals are always in transition and the conditions can constantly change, it may be reasonable to have a continuous, shorter-term aptitude assessment – perhaps conducted several times a year. For career planning, the question to be clarified is whether only the most recent aptitude assessment or older (historical) aptitude assessments are included in the decision-making process. The advantage of including historical data is that the decision is not based on a point in time – which may reflect an extreme because, for example, an employee may receive below-average aptitude assessments on one occasion because he/she was ill at the time of the survey. A disadvantage of using historical aptitude scores is that discontinuities may occur and be recognized later.

## 6. Limitations

In this paper, the focus has been placed on individual organizational career planning, but this is only one component of the entire personnel planning process. Another planning approach is collective personnel planning. Because collective and individual organizational

career plannings influence each other, there is a possibility that optimal individual career planning may not reflect optimal collective career planning and vice versa (Laser, 2017). For this reason, a holistic view is needed that incorporates both individual and collective career planning.

When planning, it should be noted in general that theoretically planned situations do not always occur as planned in practice because attempts to predict human behaviour have limitations, given that individuals can react differently from what is planned. Saaty and Vargas (1991) point out, "With the best methods of prediction there always appears to be a degree of uncertainty." However, that does not mean that planning is obsolete. Rather, it has to take into account the facts that it cannot predict everything and is error-prone.

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