

Perspectives Article

Who's in Charge? A Career Development Practice Perspective in the 'New Career' Era

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Abstract

Recent career development research and literature depicts a changing landscape. There are questions about the extent to which individuals now largely own and control their career development pathways with a much-reduced role for the organization. This background provides the context for the story of one individual's career development over a period of 14 years. Leaving school at 16 with GCSEs but little career focus a chance event three years later kick starts career development in a large international organization. Subsequently, and of some real importance, is the decision - with organizational support - to undertake a work-related Masters. The interplay between Masters based learning, work, and organizational progression provides a valuable, context specific, insight into career development practice.

The supervisory relationship within a work-related postgraduate research programme provides a unique opportunity to explore the positioning, role, and impact of such programmes on an individual's career development. This is the focus of this perspective on practice, suitably located in this Special Issue of the *Journal* devoted to career development. When the first named author joined Cadbury Schweppes in 1978 the practice of career development, at least within this major corporate body, was to all intents and purposes controlled by the organization through its corporate manpower planning section. A relatively rigid hierarchical structure across three divisions enabled career development pathways to be prepared and mapped for all the company's managers. The necessary training and experience needs were worked out and

discussed with local line management and personnel, and subsequently revealed to the individual at their annual appraisal. One strand of contemporary literature is that career development is now better understood as a much more dynamic and fluid process where careers are unpredictable, multi directional and with no overall locus of control (see for example, Modestino et al., 2019).

Whilst the extent to which these depictions represent extreme scenarios continues to be subject to debate, nonetheless the very emergence of concepts such as the 'boundaryless career' and the 'protean career' (Hite & McDonald, 2008) raise important questions about how best to understand career development practice in 2023. There are claims, both in academia and in the grey literature (see, for example, Gabrielova

& Buchko (2021) and Business in the Community (2020)) that generational differences mean individuals bring very different ideas about career development to the table than those held by graduates in the 1960s and 1970s. Whilst research evidence for such differences is both sketchy and to an extent contradictory (Lyons & Kuron, 2014) popular perceptions nonetheless add to a context in which career transitions and career pathways are more complex and challenging to understand. However, insight and understanding can be aided by context-dependent research; research which seeks to examine the interplay between organization and individual in one setting (McElroy & Weng, 2016). This is the goal of this perspective on practice; of value we trust for a range of HRD professionals interested in organizational career development practice.

The idea for the article emerged in discussions between the two authors about how to develop an excellent master's dissertation into a possible publication (increasingly a consideration for work-related postgraduate research programmes (Bullen & Reeve., 2011)). The specific construction of this perspective was enabled via an intensive 'interview' with the second named author, addressing his story pre and post Masters. The interview was transcribed and subsequently subject to a critical assessment in terms of themes current in the career development literature.

On Leaving School: Career Exploration or 'Money Driven Crazy'?

Liam is a white male, aged 29 at the time of the preparation of this article. He and his brother were raised in a single parent household; his

mother holding a number of middle management positions in a gas company. Liam describes his early background as "pretty normal". However, despite acceptance into the sixth form (straight Cs at GCSE) Liam eschews the 'normal' middle class pathway of A levels and university opting to work part-time in the local hospital; a job he had since 14 on a part-time basis (see also Table 1). Vocational guidance is either non-existent or ignored and Liam's family offer little to dissuade him from this course of action. Money is the key driver: "I was earning what felt like loads of money and I wanted to earn more ... so it was like I can drop out of school and do it". The four years after leaving school are a series of short-term contracts with no underlying pattern in terms of type of work. Any sense of career as a medium to a longer-term development pathway is largely absent. In retrospect, Liam's narrative presents the picture that he was "testing the water", finding out what he liked doing, together with a sense of being able to go back to education at a later stage if he so wished. To call this 'career exploration' - "purposive behaviours that afford access to information about occupations, jobs and organizations" (Chen et al., 2021) would be overstating things. Liam admits that he felt a bit "lost". Perhaps as a result he reflects that there was an element of "craziness" about the entire period; not in the sense of any whacky behaviour at work but more the lack of any 'sensible' or realistic thinking. The money is described as "amazing" (Liam was 16 with no bills or responsibilities) and whilst there are glimpses of a set of values which relate to performance (doing a good job) and progression, any sense of career growth within an organization is conceived of naively. "I was still very

young and immature, thinking I should be able to get to the top in a couple of

years or maybe even own the company and run it by the time I'm 20".

Table 1
Career to Date

Date	Event
2010	Leaves school aged 16. Straight Cs in GCSEs. Works part-time as cleaner at Hospital
2011	Gets full-time job at local gas company – scanning files
2011	Joins RBS (Authorizations) – call centre role
2012	Made redundant by RBS. Gets job selling cosmetic surgery
2013	Moves to NCI Insurance; claims handler
2013	Promoted to Network Manager; claims handler plus some new responsibilities
2014	Joins pet healthcare company in transportation administration
2015	Promoted to Transportation Co-ordinator
2016 - 2020	Further internal promotions/modest changes in role
2020	Commences Masters
2022	Promoted to supervisory role in transport
2022	Awarded Distinction in Masters
2023	Managerial appointment with responsibility for international region

A 'Chance Event'

Liam joins the UK arm of a substantial pet healthcare company in 2014. The opportunity comes about through a friend of a friend working at the company. It demonstrates the importance of critical 'chance events'; unplanned, or accidental encounters which nonetheless have real importance in subsequent career development (Rice, 2013). Hirschi and Valero, 2017, argue research has shown that chance events affect careers but has not established the nature of their effects. In Liam's case the impact is clear. Firstly, the job opportunity sat comfortably with Liam's somewhat uneven development to date. It offered more money, it involved dealing with 'customers' and was in logistics (as had been his previous job). But important differences were also evident. It was a large, growing, international organization and a clear commitment to HRD emerges

in the interview. Liam was asked about his multiple jobs to date but was prepared for this. "I told them about the sort of work I wanted ... and that I wanted some sort of progression in my role ... so they were well aware I was going to push for promotions from the get-go. This was well received ... I think!" Structure and hierarchy were evident, even within the department Liam was to join. Discussion included how the company would make sure that tiers of development would always be present; always a 'next step'. Thus, the chance opportunity soon presents glimpses of a career pathway beginning to open up, a scenario confirmed by early 'promotions'. These were within the department, recognizing the additional tasks Liam was undertaking. Not unsurprisingly in such a context, unplanned events continue to arise: "new things kept popping up – things I'd not come across before". Importantly, though

Liam is beginning to embrace these as learning opportunities (cf Krumboltz's (2011) happenstance learning theory). Furthermore, the promotions are crucial signals of recognition and encouragement. Liam sums it up thus: "The whole atmosphere just seemed completely different".

In the next phase of Liam's career development, the narrative shifts from one of largely uncontrolled serendipity to organizationally supported career progression. The master's is a key catalyst.

Learning Whilst Working: The Master's

Comfortably positioned in the company there is no let-up in Liam's thinking about progression possibilities. As we will discuss below this is encouraged and supported by the company. Attention turns to the possibility of doing a university degree. Conscious of the rapid progression made by friends who had taken this step post-school Liam not only feels he has missed out but feels it could further support his progression within the business. An undergraduate degree is researched but rejected – at six years it is considered too long. Other possibilities for someone with no A levels, but work experience, emerge: an MBA, an MSc in management and following discussions at a Leeds Beckett University open day and at work a decision to apply for an MSc is taken. The panic sets in once accepted! The initial experience of a return to learning at this level is somewhat daunting. It is a turbulent time. There are new pressures at work – Liam now has an employee reporting into him, and the second Covid-19 lockdown is about to happen.

Impact is slow to take shape. Within the first couple of modules, a

tension emerges. Liam had limited exposure to the sorts of topics and areas covered by the modules; finance, business strategy and management, risk etc. but the relationship, whilst in one sense very evident, is at one and the same time problematic. Liam explains:

I was learning a lot ... like lots of theories and I was trying to implement these into my work ... it was sort of transactional like what can I do to make this happen, but it wasn't working and thinking back I realize that's not how it works.

As part of their article looking at the transfer of learning for part-time professional students, D'Annunzio-Green and Barron (2019) usefully summarize the barriers as regards the transfer of learning into work. They highlight individual characteristics (motivation for example), organizational support mechanisms and organization culture and working environment. These are not issues for Liam; it is more naivety in relation to how learning transfer at postgraduate level actually works. Learning something one day and putting it into practice the next reflects an unrealistic and one-dimensional perspective. Importantly, this changes as the programme progresses.

An important change comes about as the first year draws to a close and the second year begins to unfold; not a 'light bulb' moment but more a slow realization of "things coming together". Liam explains in more detail:

I guess it was sort of a maturing process ... I began to put things into perspective ... It's always been about me in my head before. So even in work I was thinking how do I fit in. But I never really thought about the structure that I was trying to fit

into ... and I started thinking more ... and differently ... about both the Masters and the changes that were going on at work ... And I think a different mindset began to emerge ... and also, I'd got good grades and really good feedback in my first three modules and that was a real boost.

Liam continues with a further reflection:

Since finishing uni' or maybe even halfway through I definitely changed ... Before I was probably thinking how can I make myself look good, like how can I do something that makes me look good whereas now I'm thinking in a different way ... how can I do something good for the business and thinking what impact is that going to have and how can I influence a change.

The mindset change that Liam refers to resonates with Dweck's (2016) conception of a "growth mindset". Indeed, Dweck could be describing Liam when she argues individuals with a growth mindset: "worry less about looking smart and put more energy into learning" (Dweck, 2016, p. 2). Her point here reflects the change in how Liam is 'managing' the master's. As Covid-19 restrictions relax there are opportunities for more meaningful (face-to-face) dialogue with both other students and tutors. And, indeed, Liam begins to assert a degree of control over his engagement in the master's in terms of who he works with in class and proactive questioning of tutors. Importantly, outcomes extend beyond Liam's engagement with the master's. It has a bearing on his relationship with his manager and lays the basis for the emergence of an organizational growth mindset (Han & Stieha, 2020): "The

master's gave me a different way of looking at my organization ... a perspective that has helped me adapt and develop within the company".

Liam's reflections post-master's note the realization that underpinning this 'mindset' change is a set of critical professional skills which have been nurtured and developed over the two years of the programme. Three are highlighted: an enhanced learning capability, critical thinking and, relatedly, an increasing ability to deal with and manage complexity and ambiguity.

It was drilled home to us (on the master's) that you need to be critical, adopt a questioning perspective ... and I think the biggest change for me would be the realization that there's not necessarily always right and wrong ... a sort of acceptance that things aren't black and white and that there's a need to actively work with this.

These enabling skills are central to thinking on professional development and increasingly valued in the labour market (Indrasiene et al., 2023; CIPD, 2019). As we will see in the next section these capabilities are increasingly of value to Liam as he progresses in the business post-master's.

The Organization: 'How Best can We Support your Career Development?'

On completion of the master's Liam has been with the company for eight years (see also Table 1). He is still there. So, what are the significant career and professional development aspects of the interplay between individual and organization over this period? We noted, at the end of the 'on leaving school' section, Liam's perception that he had joined a large

company; one with structure and where even within his own department he could see clear glimpses of career growth opportunities.

At the same time the company is growing fast, structures are not rigid but are changing to adapt and enable business growth and development. The organizational culture, embracing change and openness, sits comfortably with Liam's emerging sense of professional development and career growth. A strong working relationship with Liam's manager forms quickly. It increasingly becomes apparent that both his new manager and indeed his manager's manager (who had also completed a Management Master's) are keen to support Liam. Importantly, the support is not confined solely to progression within the company. Liam recalls his manager saying to him "How can we support you in getting wherever you want, whether in the company or not". Whilst Liam is initially taken aback at such a gesture the decision to undertake the master's clearly has its roots in this, perhaps unusually enlightened, view of HRD (Kuchinke, 2013).

It is difficult to comment on whether such practice is common throughout the organization. This is because this individually focused aspect of organizational career development practice is taking place against a somewhat limited formal system of career development policies, and practice. Several of the traditional organizational career planning and management practices (Baruch, 2006) (e.g., job enrichment, career related performance appraisal, career related mentoring, lateral moves / job rotations) are evident but take place in a more individually focused, less systematic, more informal, fashion. Much depends on how individual managers construct and implement career development practice with those

who report to them, rather than conformity to a clear and uniform career planning policy and set of practices. This reflects Baruch's argument that the changing nature of work and more dynamic labour markets see organizations not necessarily abandoning their career development roles but rather adapting and changing the systems. Indeed, in Liam's case the organization as it grows and develops itself is playing a significant role – "being supportive and an enabler and developer of its human resources" (Baruch, 2006). Thus, for Liam there is an individually focused support system led by his manager and his manager's manager; important from day one in terms of Liam's feeling that "it will be alright here" and manifested in early job restructuring and developments, support to undertake the master's and continued support throughout this journey.

The nature of the support has its roots in regular performance reviews and updates; 'chats' with his manager rather than anything more formal. Increasingly these relate to the project work Liam is undertaking and where he has a level of autonomy in determining what he does. As befits his increasing responsibility, feedback is constructively critical, less about measurement and more about development (Heen & Stone, 2014). Indeed, career development interests are an ever-present context for this engagement with his manager – "There was a mutual understanding of my desire to progress within the company". This understanding enables a 'fit for purpose' coaching orientation to flourish, effectively integrating career development practice into everyday work.

The influence of this organizational support system is usefully illustrated with Liam's

promotion in 2023 (4 months after completing the master's) to a more senior management position in a new department and with a responsibility for an international region. Liam explains further:

It's given me a new challenge, a completely different environment to work in. It was actually an organizational change ... the department I'm in now wasn't a department prior to this. And my boss's boss discussed this with me saying he thought I would fit in well in this role ... and my boss agreed with that ... And it's a strategic job ... it aligns with the way the business is going and they felt I would fit into that very well.

The appointment involves a change in manager "but she's just as great as my old manager was", ensuring the ongoing strength of this informal career development practice.

Self and Identity: "I Feel Pretty Good Right Now with Where I Am"

A final thread in Liam's story relates to change and growth in self and identity. Although some authors are at pains to emphasise a distinction between self and identity (e.g., Savickas, 2012) we regard the concepts as inextricably interrelated, capturing the way an individual sees themselves in relation to others. There is a sense of personal pride in the successful completion of the master's (with distinction) and this sense of achievement has a very real impact on Liam's self-confidence, both within and outside work; "People at work could see this, people outside could see it". Liam exhibits a high level of self-esteem; - "I probably respect myself more as a person now". He has a firm understanding of his skills and a reflective but confident approach to

decision making - "I might get it wrong, but I don't see that as a problem ... I think increasingly I'm making better decisions now".

Importantly also, this maturing sense of self-esteem is evident in how Liam sees himself in relation to others. "I feel very much an equal member of the team ... able to voice opinions and ideas ... they might get knocked back, but they're listened to and that's important to me". We noted above that post-master's Liam is promoted into an international role. This means he increasingly finds himself working with company colleagues across Europe and who themselves are qualified to master's level or higher. In part this reflects the higher levels of supply and demand for master's level graduates in countries like Germany and the Netherlands (Green & Henseke, 2021). "It's difficult to put my finger on it but I guess I just feel on more of an equal footing ... and it's a sense of being a professional amongst professionals ... with a common goal". Liam's sense of self is perhaps best summed up by a feeling of self-worth that he is contributing to a business in which he is respected and valued.

Liam reflects that, relatively speaking, he feels a level of contentment - "I am very happy with where I am right at this second" - with work and indeed life at this point in his career development. Duffy and Dik (2009) explore the spectrum of external influences that affect career development across a lifespan; family being the most significant. For Liam this 'lifespan' is limited to 14 years; he has left home, and a 'new' family is perhaps some years off. Nonetheless, life outside of work is increasingly significant in how Liam takes stock of where he is and where he is going. "I feel the most stable in my personal life that I've ever been ... I've got a good

job, I'm engaged to be married, and I've recently bought a house ... so there aren't many disruptions around". This isn't to say career aspirations and progression have taken a back seat but rather that they are viewed in a broader context of change within the company and indeed change in his life outside work. It perhaps more accurately reflects a new 'life stage' (Gifford, 2020) rather than any supposed Gen Y characteristic.

Finally, we note how this sense of self and identity merge into a sense of ongoing and future career development. Liam accepts that his career pathway will almost certainly continue to change and evolve. Uncertainty is increasingly the bedfellow of organizational change. Yet Liam has a maturing sense of how to manage his career development learning, enabling him to use the unplanned events advantageously (cf Galatt & Galatt, 2003) whilst simultaneously considering further, more formal, professional development opportunities. He acknowledges that his career to date has been largely linear and that this may change in the future. However, unlike some of his Gen Y and Gen Z friends who display some of the job-hopping characteristics supposedly characteristic of this generational category (Stahl, 2022) Liam presents a more nuanced account. "I can see it being successful for some people like when they're wanting the next jump, and their company isn't offering anything ... but I also think can you really have much impact if you're in a job less than a year ... can you explore and develop a role?"

Conclusions

This perspective article, by definition, is restricted to Liam's career to date and thus covers a relatively short time span. Nonetheless in a

complex and changing career landscape it is useful to pause for breath and consider a context specific case against this backcloth. With Liam's story it is difficult to untangle the master's from work. There is an ongoing dynamic which has continued post completion of the course. This said, two interrelated conclusions are drawn; first as regards the impact of the master's and second, as regards the organizational context in which Liam's career has largely been based.

The Master's

Liam's story takes place against a dominant discourse emphasizing the new career, the boundary less career, the protean career. Of course, the undertaking of a master's five years into employment with his current employer might be seen as a feature of the 'new' career. But as we have seen this is no 'jumping off' point to pastures new. Instead, there is an acknowledgement of how the master's has provided a crucial set of 'steppingstones' to enable Liam to progress within the company to a position of some significance, making an international and strategic contribution to the business. It warrants the conclusion that it has been a crucial career development "transition" (Sullivan & Ariss, 2021), encapsulating important and influential changes in key skills, self-understanding, and identity. Liam's orientation to his work and his employer change significantly during this transition.

The Organization

We began this perspective piece with a recollection that the first named author's career development with Cadbury Schweppes had been one in which the organization was very much in control. A strong thread in literature (for example, McElroy & Weng, 2016) suggests that increasingly the pendulum has swung to a position

where the onus is with the individual. We should also note the importance of wider social structures (gender, class, ethnicity) in influencing any interplay between individual and organization in terms of career progression. Liam, as a white, middle-class male perhaps enables him to 'fit in' very comfortably to the prevailing organizational culture. However, whilst not wishing to blindly disregard such influences we have sought to focus this perspective on how Liam himself makes sense of the developing and dynamic relationship between individual and organization. The relationship, significantly influenced by the master's, is central to Liam's career development thinking and practice. Clearly, in this case, the organizational career is not dead (Clarke, 2013; Lips-Wiersma & Hall, 2007). Yes, a wider career development perspective is being taken. It may become multi-dimensional rather than linear in the future but an important sense of mutual reciprocity ("I'm contributing ... they're supporting") is being maintained. Ultimately there is 'no overall control' with individual or organization. A shared responsibility characterizes career development for Liam; one which, for the time being at least, seems to serve both individual and corporate interests well.

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About the Authors

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Rick Holden joined Cadbury Schweppes Ltd on completion of his PhD, working in personnel and training. He subsequently spent nearly 30 years with Leeds Beckett University (formerly Leeds Polytechnic). During this time he taught HRD, led numerous HRD-related research projects and published extensively. He is co-author of the textbook *HRD: Theory and Practice*. He was Editor of *Education & Training* for 20 years and founding Editor of the *International Journal of HRD: Practice, Policy and Research*. More recently he has rejoined Leeds Beckett University as an Associate supervising master's students.



**Liam Percival**

Liam Percival has worked for a global pet healthcare company for the last 9 years in a progression of roles within the transportation department. In 2022, Liam completed his Masters in Management at Leeds Beckett University, graduating with a distinction. He studied whilst working full-time, and on completion of the degree, achieved an international managerial role within the company.