

# 1. Careers: what they are and how to look at them

**Wolfgang Mayrhofer, Jon Briscoe, Michael Dickmann, Douglas T. Hall and Emma Parry**

---

Careers are central to people's lives. They are fascinating for both those having a career and those who are their observers, be they scholars or interested bystanders. Situated at the intersection of individual biography and societal history (Grandjean, 1981) and covering issues of being, time and space (Gunz and Mayrhofer, 2018), careers mirror individual, organizational, cultural and institutional commonalities and idiosyncrasies (Briscoe, Hall, and Mayrhofer, 2012).

A fascinating phenomenon is often one that affects many of us deeply, has various facets that are difficult to fully grasp, and where future developments are not easily forecast. Careers are no exception. On the one hand, careers affect everyone in the world of work and have identifiable building blocks that are interlinked. On the other hand, they are not easily captured or fully understood, and their future development is shrouded in a mist of guesses, hopes and worries.

## EVERYONE HAS A CAREER – AND IT MATTERS PROFOUNDLY

In contrast to a popular, yet misleading, understanding that only successful people have a career, a more sober and scientifically grounded understanding suggests that every person taking part in the world of work has one. In its most reduced form, it constitutes a sequence of positions in social, temporal and geographical spaces. Of course, more sophisticated definitions abound. Here are a few examples:

- The moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole (Hughes, 1958: 63).
- The individually perceived sequence of attitudes and behaviours associated with work-related experiences and activities over the span of the person's life (Hall, 2002: 12).

- The sequence of an individual's different career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual (De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2015: 7).
- A pattern of a career actor's positions and condition within a bounded social and geographic space over their life to date (Gunz and Mayrhofer, 2018: 70).

While major handbooks indicate a number of different viewpoints (e.g., Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence, 1989; Gunz, Lazarova, and Mayrhofer, 2020; Gunz and Peiperl, 2007), some commonalities in the conceptualizations of careers emerge. These demonstrate that everyone who does paid work has a career. Modern career concepts are much broader than simply charting connotations of upward mobility and monetary success.

Other commonalities are that careers unfold in a bounded social and geographical space. This implies external boundaries formally and/or informally regulating entry and exit. For example, this might apply to entry into a professional field such as accounting or activities such as bricklaying. Likewise, internal boundaries such as requirements for promotions influence movements within the space. We move from position to position, for example jobs that are available or informal positions such as 'newcomer' or 'elder statesperson'. Career transitions are the result of these moves from position to position.

It is important how we personally view these moves and how we feel about them. When evaluating our careers, we can draw on seven dimensions of career success related to growth, life design or material output. They are entrepreneurship, learning and development (growth); work-life balance, positive impact, positive work relationships (life design); and financial security and financial success (material output). Underlying this is the crucial differentiation between objective and subjective career success. Objective career success is related to indicators such as income and promotion. Subjective career success, meanwhile, is linked to growth, meaning and, ultimately, satisfaction.

Careers unfold not only in space, but also in time. While it is possible that career episodes overlap, they are often distinct, which makes them and associated career transitions exciting to investigate from a temporal perspective. It is important to stress that time is not necessarily monolithic; instead, highly differentiated conceptualizations of time exist. Figure 1.1 gives an overview of the basic components of careers.

Not only does everyone working have a career in the sense just outlined, but we are also heavily affected by our careers. Careerists can be sovereign competent actors determining their own fate or they can at least be partially thrown around by luck and other external contingencies. Navigating our way through the world of work requires and leads to a substantial involvement of our selves.

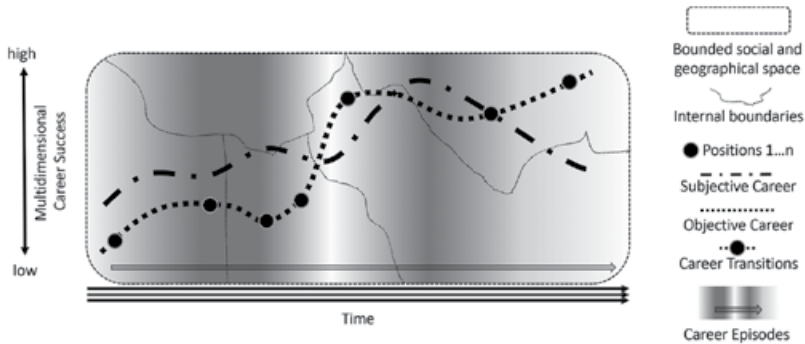


Figure 1.1 *Anatomy of careers*

It is essential for our identity and social status. Our objective careers – visible because of our jobs conveying a certain status, the trajectory displayed in our CVs, the income we have at our disposal expressed through housing, cars or education for our children – express and, at the same time, form our social status. They provide crucial building blocks of our identity. Likewise, our subjective career expresses and contributes to our well-being and gives an emotional connotation to who we are in the world of work and beyond.

Above, we have introduced the concept of ‘being’, the career actors who influence their career journeys through their motivations, behaviours and attitudes. This career agency is embedded in a ‘space’. One of the strengths of this book is that it takes up the call to explore such issues in different social and geographical contexts (Mayrhofer, Smale, Briscoe, Dickmann, and Parry, 2020), depicting perceived career realities across all inhabited continents of the world. In addition, time matters, and many of the chapters convey an acute sensitivity to the career context of actors at a particular time. In a nutshell: careers matter deeply, and they are shaped by being, space and time.

## CORE PERSPECTIVES ON CAREERS

Careers constitute a rich, multifaceted phenomenon. Above we have argued that careers are profoundly impacted and driven by our selves, that they are embedded in a holistic context and located in time. Against the backdrop of this anatomy, three perspectives on careers – ontic, spatial and temporal – emerge. They help to identify and illuminate crucial aspects of careers.

*Being.* The ontic perspective<sup>1</sup> on careers centres on various conditions of the career actor, here: the persons having a career. This includes issues such as their gender, age, job, career satisfaction and career stage – in short, everything

that matters and helps to characterize the person's condition. The chapters in this book will provide a wide range of examples from the ontic perspective, reflecting the broad spectrum of individual conditions important in careers. They include, for example, career resilience (Italy), career reinvention linked to significant identity changes (Russia), career capitals that individuals own and discover (Turkey), psychological needs (Germany/Hamburg), career goals (Lithuania), and expectations vis-à-vis their work (Mexico).

*Space.* The spatial perspective acknowledges that careers unfold not in a vacuum, but in a defined social and geographical space. This space is structured by external and internal boundaries, populated by other individuals, groups and organizations, and governed by formal and informal rules that individuals may or may not be aware of. Countries constitute such spaces. While all of the chapters testify to that, some zoom in on this space, for example when looking at migrants returning home from diaspora (Nigeria) and when discussing prevailing national views on what is (not) expected from different societal groups (Argentina) and on the effects of national and transnational disruptions (Greece, Portugal). Indeed, institutional approaches and how government policies are interpreted, implemented and perceived can have a substantial effect on foreign careerists (United Kingdom). Professions such as professional sports (Australia) or academia (Ireland) are other examples for varying institutional approaches and government policies. Likewise, organizations constitute such spaces. They provide career opportunities and manage the careers of employees in specific ways (Finland) and directions beyond mere advancement (Norway). In a similar manner, relationships with crucial individuals within one's personal social space, whether related to one's family (India, Slovakia) or in the work setting (Pakistan), matter for career advancement.

*Time.* The temporal perspective points towards time as a crucial aspect underlying careers. Sometimes, time is an obvious issue when looking at careers. This is the case when we compare different generations and how they approach careers (Switzerland) or look at social mobility (Austria), the challenges and rewards of the life and career transitions of newcomers and the importance of mentoring and developmental networks in enabling cultural and identity transitions (Canada), and forced migration in the case of refugees (Germany/Bamberg). In other cases, time is more in the background, but is still of crucial importance. Examples include the hesitation about making a career move (Belgium) and the interplay between change and continuity in the national context (Japan).

## CAREER OUTCOMES

The outcomes of careers are manifold. Basically, we can differentiate between objective and subjective career success (Gunz and Heslin, 2005; Hughes, 1937). The former comprises indicators that are hard facts and, as a rule, can be observed by others. As discussed above, they include income, number of promotions and hierarchical position within an organization. Subjective career success addresses how individuals perceive and feel about their careers, resulting in indicators such as career satisfaction and fulfilment. Building on this and on an extensive study of all the culture clusters of the world, work from the 5C Group (Briscoe et al., 2021, 2012; see also [www.5C.careers](http://www.5C.careers)) suggests there are seven facets of career success, divided into three groups – growth, life design and material output – that individuals use across the globe (Figure 1.2).



Figure 1.2 Facets of career success (building on Mayrhofer et al., 2016)

Figure 1.2 shows that growth, life design and material output relate to career success and depicts some sub-dimensions. Learning and development covers aspects linked with growth such as professional development and personal growth. Entrepreneurship covers aspects linked to self-employment and running one's own business. Work-life balance addresses the satisfying integration of various aspects of one's life. Positive impact relates to the opportunity of contributing to the development of others and leaving people and places better as a result of one's own doing. Positive work relationships articulate the importance of good relationships with the people one is working with. While financial security addresses the importance of survival and basic necessities, financial success is about achieving wealth beyond this. Given such career outcomes, the importance of career success cannot seriously be questioned. Each chapter in this book charts careers in different contexts, outlining some career outcomes.

## THE USEFULNESS OF THIS BOOK FOR THE READER

The stories and some of the frameworks in this book (including the career success outcomes framework) were produced by authors belonging to an ongoing international research project carried out by the 5C Group (Cross-Cultural Collaboration on Contemporary Careers; more information can be found at [www.5C.careers](http://www.5C.careers)). Founded in 2004 by Jon Briscoe at Northern Illinois University, Douglas (Tim) Hall at Boston University and Wolfgang Mayrhofer at Vienna University of Business and Economics (WU Vienna), this group has sought to understand careers from a local and cross-cultural perspective. Starting with a qualitative study in 12 countries, the 5C Group has since conducted two major surveys on career success, including one on coping during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, over 30 countries from the major cultural regions of the world are represented in 5C. The group's goal is to help individuals, their families and other social communities, line managers, human resource management, organizations and society to support flourishing careers through better understanding them.

As part of fulfilling that goal, this sourcebook intends to give hands-on, real-life examples of how careers play out in different countries as the primary and most visible point of reference. In exploring the wide array of different career shapes, dynamics and spaces, it is fascinating to see how context and time impacts on the careers of 'beings'. The stories in the book are multifaceted and instructive of the wide opportunities that working people have as well as some of the barriers they may encounter.

While this is (hopefully) entertaining and informative, it also requires some form of scaffold that readers can revert to in order to sort and systematize the issues addressed and to make sense of them. Both the anatomy of careers and

the three perspectives of being, space and time can form such a scaffold. The next chapter provides a brief guide on how to successfully navigate the rich contents of this book.

## NOTE

1. Ontic comes from the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and 'is concerned primarily with entities and the facts about them' (Heidegger, 1962: 31).

## REFERENCES

- Arthur, M. B., Hall, D. T., and Lawrence, B. S. (Eds). 1989. *Handbook of Career Theory*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Briscoe, J. P., Hall, D. T., and Mayrhofer, W. 2012. *Careers Around the World: Individual and Contextual Perspectives*. New York: Routledge.
- Briscoe, J. P., Kaše, R., Dries, N., Dysvik, A., Unite, J. A., et al. 2021. Here, there, and everywhere: Development and validation of a cross-culturally representative measure of subjective career success. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, (130)103612.
- De Vos, A., and Van der Heijden, B. I. J. M. 2015. *Handbook of Research on Sustainable Careers*. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Grandjean, B. D. 1981. History and career in a bureaucratic labor market. *American Journal of Sociology*, 86(5): 1057–1092.
- Gunz, H. P., and Heslin, P. A. 2005. Reconceptualizing career success. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26(2): 105–111.
- Gunz, H. P., Lazarova, M. B., and Mayrhofer, W. (Eds). 2020. *The Routledge Companion to Career Studies*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Gunz, H. P., and Mayrhofer, W. 2018. *Rethinking Career Studies: Facilitating Conversation across Boundaries with the Social Chronology Framework*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gunz, H. P., and Peiperl, M. 2007. *Handbook of Career Studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hall, D. T. 2002. *Careers In and Out of Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Heidegger, M. 1962. *Being and Time*. Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA, USA: Blackwell.
- Hughes, E. C. 1937. Institutional office and the person. *American Journal of Sociology*, 43(3): 404–413.
- Hughes, E. C. 1958. *Men and Their Work*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Mayrhofer, W., Briscoe, J. P., Hall, D. T., Dickmann, M., Dries, N., et al. 2016. Career success across the globe. *Organizational Dynamics*, 45(3): 197–205.
- Mayrhofer, W., Smale, A., Briscoe, J., Dickmann, M., and Parry, E. 2020. Laying the foundations of international careers research. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 30(3): 327–342.

# Chapter 1: Careers: what they are and how to look at them

Mayrhofer, Wolfgang

2023-04-21

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

---

Mayrhofer W, Briscoe J, Dickmann M, et al., (2023) Chapter 1: Careers: what they are and how to look at them. In: Understanding careers around the globe: Stories and sourcebook, Edgar Elgar Publishing, pp. 2-8

<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035308415.00006>

*Downloaded from CERES Research Repository, Cranfield University*