

Shift Happens

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Abstract

Career landscapes are changing, work and the meaning of work is changing. We are all changing, in fact change is inevitable except from a vending machine. Uncertainty and insecurity historically have always been a part of work for most workers, yet in the 20th century we became attached to the goals of predictability and stability in work and career. For the 21st century we need to re-embrace the realities of change, recognizing that stability and change are both integral parts of work and careers. We need to understand and capitalize on the fact that shift happens.

We are in the shift business

The words most commonly used to describe our discipline include “vocational” and “career development”. The former meaning a calling or to be called, and the latter suggesting progression. Other words that are commonly used include transition, change, and outplacement. All of these terms relate to movement or shift. Our definitions of our field always come back to the acknowledgement of shift. Indeed Savickas (1997) argues that movement is the defining quality of the human condition – to live is to move. Movement is what separates us from inanimate objects. Amundson (2003) observes that clients often present their career problems in terms of being “stuck” which is often accompanied by a sense of loss of spirit.

Evidence of shift in career trajectories is plentiful. For instance Jepson and Chouduri (2001) followed a cohort of 170 people over 25 years and found almost two thirds experienced changing occupational career patterns. Not only is shift the most common career experience, it might even contribute positively to satisfaction. Jepson and Chouduri reported that stable occupational career patterns were associated with lower levels of career satisfaction.

Within the domain of career change, increasing attention is being given to unplanned change (e.g. Betsworth & Hanson, 1996; Bright, Pryor & Harpham, 2005; Cabral & Salomone, 1990; Chen, 2005; Mitchell, Levin, & Krumboltz, 1999; Osipow, 1973).

For some reason Keynote presentations are rarely double-acts, so although I am listed as the sole author of this paper it is genuinely the result of a double-act with Professor Robert Pryor, and the ideas contained therein are the result of our collaboration on the Chaos Theory of Careers dating back 8 or more years. However any errors or idiocies in the paper are very definitely down to me!

A consistent pattern emerges from studies employing a range of different methodologies including surveys and case studies that between 60% and 100% of adolescents and adults report chance events that significantly influenced their career paths.

Given the centrality of movement to our definitions of our field and our practice it is perhaps ironic how relatively neglected movement has been in our research and practice. Two key metaphors of career that do not immediately imply movement are the metaphors of career as fit, and career as resource, yet arguably these metaphors have dominated career development theory and practice for the last 100 years. This may provide a clue as to why our theory and practice in the area of shift is strangely limited.

Career as fit is typically associated with the theories of Frank Parsons and John Holland. Much has been written about these approaches, and it is fair to say that the concept of fit between individuals and occupations as the basis for predicting occupational outcomes or as a basis for practice has been subject to an exponentially increasing critical commentary (e.g. Amundson, 2003, 2004; Arnold, 2004; Bright, Pryor & Harpham, 2005; Patton & McMahon, 2006; Pryor & Bright, 2003ab, 2007; Savickas 1997 etc).

Career as resource is most seen most clearly in the discipline and practice of Human Resources. This allied discipline has also laboured under a characterisation of individuals that does not encourage one to think of them as continually shifting and subject to shift. Indeed much of the change management literature appears to be predicated on the notion of coercing or cajoling individuals to accept and adapt to change regimes. Furthermore, rarely is change construed in this literature as being anything more complex than a simple movement from an “old” structure to a “new” structure.

The dominant metaphors of fit and resource have not encouraged us to deal with the complexity of shift. Indeed shift has been given short-shrift in the career development literature. This is partly due to the limiting nature of the chosen metaphors of fit and resource. They do not provide a ready language or framework to consider shift. This does not mean that shift has not been acknowledged in career development, but typically it has been relegated to a minor role.

Most existing career development theories fail to account adequately for four crucial contemporary elements in career development and choice (Pryor & Bright, 2003a,b, 2007; Bright & Pryor, 2005).

1. Failure to incorporate the range of potential influences on people's careers
2. Failure to move beyond a narrow sense of matching the dynamic, interactive and adaptive nature of human functioning in the world and in making career decisions and taking career action.
3. Failure to go beyond acknowledging to incorporating into theory the tendency of humans to construe and construct experiences and perceptions into meaningful and often unique interpretive structures for understanding themselves, their experiences and their world.

4. Failure to adequately conceptualise unplanned and unpredictable events and experiences which are often crucial and sometimes determinative in the narrative of people's careers.

This paper primarily addresses point four, that often we fail to conceptualise adequately unplanned events and experiences.

Shift Happens

Shift happens in all lives, but luckily for most of us, the shift is not as dramatic as the one that happened to a cigar loving army officer 145 years ago and related in Durschmied (2000). On the 13th September 1862, First Sergeant John Bloss and Corporal Barton Mitchell of the Union Army 12th corps found a campsite near Hagerstown, Maryland, that had been vacated by their enemy, the Confederate Army, earlier that day. Bloss found an envelope that contained a parcel wrapped in white paper. The parcel contained three high quality cigars, but the paper they were wrapped in was even more important, it contained the Confederate's battle plans. This led directly to a conflict on the 17th of September at Antietam, resulting in the loss of over 23,000 lives, the bloodiest day in America's history.

Three cigars changed the course of American history, and bizarrely another cigar played a coarse role in the fortunes US President Bill Clinton. So perhaps the first take home message is avoid cigars if you want to minimise unpleasant career outcomes. The second and hopefully more important point is that we have a strong tendency to underestimate or even miss the influence of shift in our lives.

Shift can be defined as:

- Often Unplanned and always unpredictable
- Significant – it affects what matters to us
- Reconfiguring – it changes our schemes, maps and attractors, it changes our systems

In the next section, shift is considered in more detail.

Fast shift, slow shift and deep shift

Shift comes in many different guises. Sometimes the shift is a truly shocking “left field” event that turns our world upside down. This is Fast Shift. These are the high impact events over which we have little control. Chan, Pryor & Bright (in preparation) demonstrated that we have a bias to think that such events are typically negative, for instance car crashes where we are seriously injured. We less often think of positive events such as being swept off our feet by a romantic partner.

Shift is not always dramatic; it can build up slowly over time, and can be almost imperceptible to the person most affected by it. The changing mood of voters last year seemed to creep up on John Howard almost imperceptibly, but devastatingly. We may well be in the middle of a fundamental shift in world economic power from the West to the East, but it is hard to say when this started or how it will end. Unlike

dramatic change where it is obvious that something is happening that requires a response, the slow shift operates in a clandestine fashion which is easy to neglect or overlook. Indeed this how people can end up in deep shift without realising the full implications of their situation.

In its negative form, awareness of the slow shift might come simply by waking up one morning questioning how you became the person you are today or how you got into the situation facing you today. Alternatively, that realisation can be provoked by a confronting experience through the words of a well-meaning friend or even an enemy. Sometimes it can be triggered by an experience that shakes you out of your complacency.

Career Counsellors are ShiftWorkers

We have all become shift workers. Pryor and Bright have taken the term Shiftwork and redefined it as the effort and skills required to use productively the fluctuating fortunes of our careers. Shiftwork is the work we have to put into our careers to continually re-invent ourselves, to spot opportunities, to recover from set-backs, to find meaningful work that matters to us and to others and to capitalise on chance. Hence Shiftwork covers the major developmental tasks in 21st century career development.

As Shiftworkers, counsellors are sometimes called upon to introduce shift by creating dissonance in the client's system. Clients who present as "stuck" or those who are fixated on a particular issue or course of action may benefit from interventions that cause a shift in their thinking. To do this may involve moving the individual from a limiting attractor by introducing influences that cause the system to reconfigure or shift. This may be through the presentation of evidence, reality checks, self-exploration exercises or other methods.

Alternatively productive shiftwork might involve addressing client inflexibility or a myopic view of their circumstances and their world by moving clients from a closed to an open system perspective. Shiftwork may entail encouraging clients who are insensitive to the consequences of their actions to engage in more thorough or far-reaching analysis to understand their complexity and interconnectedness, and to gain an appreciation of the some of the ramifications of their ideas.

Shiftwork can also involve confronting unrealistic expectations or unfounded optimism, to assist the client to a more manageable or realistic appreciation of their circumstances, options or strategies.

Implications of shift: Limits on Predictability

It follows if we accept the premise that our lives are built on shifting sands, that there are severe limits to our ability to make long-range deterministic predictions. While we kid ourselves that we can do this, it turns out in many fields of human endeavour that we do not do it very well. Taleb (2007) makes the following point about prediction: "when I ask people to name three recently implemented technologies that

most impact our world today, they usually propose the computer, the Internet and the laser. All three were unplanned, unpredicted and unappreciated” (pp 135).

Limitations in our ability to predict the future can be seen in the repeated failure of interest inventories to predict significant outcomes for clients. Arnold (2004) noted that congruence between the person and environment has been shown in several meta-studies to correlate poorly (between 0.1 and 0.2) with outcome measures such as satisfaction (e.g. Assouline & Meir, 1987; Tranberg, Slane, & Ekeberg, 1993; Young, Tokar & Subich, 1998). Arnold (2004) highlights the problem by observing that the concept of congruence in Holland’s (1997) theory accounts for only 1% - 4% of the outcome measure variance. He proposes 14 problems with the theory including inadequate conceptualization of the person and the environment, inadequate measurement of the environment, the fact that job environments are increasingly demanding variety and diversity and that jobs are continually changing.

Several of vocational psychology’s leading authorities have openly questioned the continuing value of traditional person-environment fit models of career choice wondering whether they fail to capture adequately the complexities, uncertainties and dynamic aspects of modern work (e.g. Mitchell et al, 1999; Pryor & Bright 2003a, 2003b; Savickas & Baker, 2005) As Savickas and Baker (2005) point out, “With less stable personalities and occupations, vocational psychology’s basic model of person-environment fit with its goal of congruence seems less useful and less possible in today’s labor market.” (p.49).

How shift works: Chaos Theory of Careers

Understanding shift, and assisting clients to understand and live with shift in their lives is a worthy goal for career development. Pryor and Bright (e.g. Bright & Pryor, 2005, 2007a,b; Bright, Pryor & Harpham, 2005; Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld & Earl, 2005; Pryor and Bright, 2003ab, 2004, 2007a,b, in press; Pryor, Amundson & Bright in press) have described how the application of Chaos Theory provides a powerful language in which to understand individuals as complex dynamical systems.

The Chaos Theory of Careers (CTC) characterises individuals as being subject to a complex array of influences which dramatically reduces our ability to predict future behaviour. Instead it is more profitable to look at the patterns of behaviour that emerge over time. The emergent patterns generated by chaos have the following properties: they are complex; the pattern never exactly repeats, but is self-similar over time, and although it is complex it is ultimately bounded (it has a clear shape and is not completely haphazard).

The fact that we do have boundaries points to the fact that every person has unique qualities that make them individual, and it also points to limitations of our knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes. The forces that constrain and impose shape on the system are called Attractors. Pryor and Bright (2007a) highlight how there are four classes of Attractors that limit our functioning. These are the point; pendulum; torus and strange attractors, or alternatively they can be thought of as the goal, role, routine and complex attractors. The goal, role and routine attractors dramatically constrain the movement of the system to a limited set of outcomes. The goal (or point) attractor draws all system behaviour towards one fixed position, the role (or pendulum)

attractor constrains us to oscillate between two fixed positions, and the routine (torus) attractor limits the system to cycle through a series of pre-defined positions. The complex attractor is the natural human state where although there is an ultimate boundedness of the system, within that there is an infinite number of different possible states, and the pattern of system movement never exactly repeats but does exhibit a degree of self similarity over time.

Phase shift is the mechanism that describes the system changing Attractors. It is the point at which the system reconfigures and settles into a pattern of functioning that is constrained by a new Attractor. A classic example of a phase shift in chaos theory is the transformation of water into steam or into ice. At the phase boundary we see a dramatic transformation in the qualities of water either from a liquid into a gas or a liquid into a solid. The phase shift simultaneously provides new possibilities and potential applications, while eliminating others.

The other example typically used is a sandpile. When grains of sand are successively poured onto a pile, a characteristic pyramid shape emerges, however at a particular and unpredictable point, the addition of an extra grain of sand results in a mini-avalanche where the pile reconfigures its shape from a pyramid to something more akin to a mountain range.

Bright and Pryor (2003ab, 2007ab) contend that humans can be seen as chaotic systems – i.e. our behaviour is patterned, complex, emerges over time and is inherently unpredictable and subject to continuous change over time. In other words the strange attractor is our default way of functioning. It follows then that our behaviour shows an inherent pattern over time, but this pattern is also subject to potentially dramatic and unpredictable change at any time. In such a model pattern and surprise are inherent aspects of our being. Shift is built into the system. Shift happens.

In the CTC shift occurs within the system due to its very nature, but shift can also be caused due to the influence of all the other systems that exist around us. Patton and McMahon (2006) have provided an extensive taxonomy of many of the other systems that may influence us such as other people, the environment, economic and political factors and so on.

Coping and Counselling, Shift Strategies

While shift is a universal phenomenon, it is not an egalitarian one. Shift affects different people differentially and some are more vulnerable to shift than others. Individual differences in susceptibility to shift can arise from an infinite variety of factors, or combinations of those factors. Situational factors that may influence shift susceptibility include socio-economic status, geography, the forces of globalisation, fashion, politics and war.

Personal factors that may influence shift susceptibility include persistence, strategy, efficacy, flexibility, optimism, perceptions of being lucky, risk taking, curiosity and planfulness. Furthermore our tendency to overlook shift, or our attempts to control and predict shift can also influence our susceptibility to shift. These factors may also

partially explain why there are those more attuned to seeing shift or recognising its influence.

As shiftworkers we need tools and strategies that address the inevitable career issues that arise when confronting complexity, change, and chance in the lives of our clients. Tools that assist clients and counsellor understand reactions to complexity can initiate new career conversations about the most important aspects of career development. Understanding how a client reacts to change can be aided using a tool like the Complexity Perception Index (Bright & Pryor, 2007). Alternatively conversations about how to develop opportunity awareness, or how to develop strategies to capitalise on luck can be assisted with the Luck Readiness Index (Pryor & Bright, 2007).

Other strategies include addressing concepts such as optimism (Pryor & Bright, 2006), possibilities and probabilities (Pryor, Amundson & Bright in press; Bright & Pryor, 2007), magic in careers (Pryor & Bright, 2006) or changing the game or the rules of the game (Pryor & Bright, in press).

The recent career development literature has promoted the use of narratives to provide insight into individuals' behaviour. The application of narrative approaches can be extended by considering the role of plot within clients' narratives. 7 Archetypal narratives derived from the work of Booker (2004) are introduced that represent systems of meaning that provide insight into how individuals interpret their experience. We contend that these plots can be understood within the CTC (Bright & Pryor, 2005; Pryor & Bright in press), specifically in terms of the Attractors contained within the client narratives. In the CTC career development problems generally arise when clients attempt to impose closed systems Attractors on open system problems through the choice of Archetypal plot contained in their narratives. Identifying the plots underlying individuals' stories and the attractors they represent, provides new insights into the nature of such counselling clients' difficulties and provides the possibility of assisting clients to adopt more helpful plots for their circumstances. Shiftwork using narrative may involve helping clients shift to a more useful plot.

Conclusion

The reality is that shift happens to all of us and it is happening to you right now. We spend much of our careers trying to predict and avoid negative fast shifts, while at the same time chasing after positive fast shifts such as promotions and get-rich-quick schemes. The danger is that all of this focus on the dramatic shifts reduces our chances of being alert to the slow shifts. The result of this is that we can find ourselves at odds with what really matters to us. Good shift-workers continually monitor both the fast and the slow shifts and know what really matters to them.

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