**The Dynamics of Diplomatic Careers: The shift from traditional to contemporary Careers**

**Cite as:**

Hart, D. & Baruch, Y. (2022). The Dynamics of Diplomatic Careers: The Shift from Traditional to Contemporary Careers. *Human Resource Management*, doi: 10.1002/hrm.22092

Career research has focused on the changing structures of careers, mainly in the private sector. Recent literature on employment patterns in the public sector suggests that career structures are evolving, gradually moving away from their signature traditional structures to contemporary ones. However, empirical evidence of this change is scarce and inconclusive. This qualitative study examines the changes currently unfolding in the career structure of the civil service by eliciting the experiences and views of senior Foreign Offices (FOs) staff in four countries: 198 state ambassadors from the US, the UK, Israel and Denmark were interviewed about their career trajectories. The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis framework. The findings revealed a gradual breakdown of the structures and policies that support traditional careers, and the emergence of new principles and practices that characterize contemporary careers. However, as they were captured midway through the process of change, all FOs display a combination of traditional and contemporary career structures at this point. The findings offer unique insights into the drivers of this evolution and highlight some of the consequences.

*Keywords:* Boundaryless career, Protean career, Diplomats, Ambassadors

**Introduction**

For nearly four decades, scholarly research has described and analyzed the changing structures of careers, mainly in the private sector (Biemann, Zacher, & Feldman, 2012; Kalleberg & Mouw, 2018; Ng & McGinnis Johnson, 2020). A growing body of research suggests that traditional organization-based career structures are gradually phasing out while contemporary models are becoming the norm for individual and organizational careers.

The traditional career system is often portrayed as limited to working in one organization that is highly hierarchical, rigid in structure, and linear in its progression trajectory (Arthur, 2008; Hall, 1976). The progression is based on winning a series of internal competitions within a pyramid structure, where top jobs are scarce and hence hard to attain (Rosenbaum, 1979). In contrast, contemporary careers and labor markets are often depicted as dynamic, even chaotic (Tams & Marshall, 2011), reflecting the changes in the psychological contract between employees and their employers (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019; Rousseau, 1996). With multidirectional trajectories, employees are expected to be more flexible when managing their careers as they face uncertain and risky routes (Hall, 2004).

Despite mounting research on these topics, critics of career studies, particularly of contemporary career theories, argue that there is significant theoretical fragmentation and ambiguity in this field of inquiry (Lee, Felps, & Baruch, 2014). They further allude to conflicting findings regarding the state of contemporary careers and their impact on organizations and their employees (Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). Recent studies have called for a re-examination of the scope and nature of changes in career structures (Guan, Arthur, Khapova, Hall, & Lord, 2019; Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, & Roper, 2012), arguing that a significant proportion of the labor market remains traditional, particularly in the public sector (Rodrigues, Guest, & Budjanovcanin, 2016).

Much of the extant empirical research explores the private sector, while research on career orientations, structures, and paths within the public sector remains limited (McDonald, Brown, & Bradley, 2005). This makes it difficult to assess the degree to which their structures and policies adhere to the traditional models, and whether their perceived security and stability is reality or myth. This gap is problematic since the public sector has a significant share of the labor market, at 16% in US and 17% in the UK for example (Mayer, 2014; ONS, 2020), and therefore has a considerable impact on the economy. Additionally, although the public sector is exposed to similar economical, technological and social forces that have driven career changes in the private sector (Rose, 2013), it remains unknown whether or not similar changes have penetrated it.

With these research gaps in mind, we pose two key questions: Are traditional career structures in the public sector being replaced by contemporary structures? If so, what aspects of contemporary careers are being adopted in the public sector? We address these questions by exploring changes that are currently unfolding in one of the most distinctively traditional careers in the civil service: The Foreign Office diplomatic service.

In addressing these questions, we contribute to several lines of inquiry. Within career literature, there is a lack of clarity around the nature and outcomes of contemporary careers, and how they compare to traditional careers (Crowley-Henry, Benson, & Al Ariss, 2019). We contribute to the understanding of the changes that took place in career structures and how these changes develop and unfold within the public sector – a topic that has attracted only limited empirical investigation. This point is of significance to HR managers who need to understand and address these changes, for example, in seeking to source and retain future talent for their organizations. We uncover dimensions of careers that differ between traditional and contemporary careers, shedding light on specific aspects of career changes. Another area within career research to which we contribute is the study of executives who occupy the higher echelons of organizations. Currently, career research on this population is limited, since access to them is challenging, and a significant share of this field of inquiry focuses on demographic factors (Hambrick & Quigley, 2014). We contribute to this line of research by gaining an understanding on how executives perceive contemporary career structures and their impact on those in leadership positions and how they manage these unfolding structural career changes. We explore the changing expectations from both employees in the public sector, and the HR system of talent management for the higher echelons.

By drawing on these strands of research, we also integrate career studies and public administration, two strands of scholarship that have traditionally been studied separately. The current paper addresses these gaps and debates by examining the pace and degree of the changes that the diplomatic service has undergone along its trajectory from traditional career structures to the more contemporary ones, and some of the consequences.

***Theoretical Underpinning***

This paper draws mainly from two contemporary career theories: boundaryless and protean careers. The term ‘boundaryless career’ (Arthur, 2014; Arthur & Rousseau, 2001) symbolizes the transition from traditional to contemporary careers, driven by the breakdown of multiple boundaries (organizational, geographical, social, and psychological) that supported traditional career systems. The term ‘protean career’ (Hall, 2004) captures the changing nature of employees’ viewpoints on contemporary careers: “The protean career is a process which the person, not the organization, is managing. It consists of all the person’s experiences in education, training, work in several organizations, changes in occupational field, etc.” (Hall, 1976, p. 201). Thus, the protean career construct describes the experiences of employees as they assume the responsibility for planning, managing, enacting and evaluating their careers (Hall, 2004).

A number of contributions to career theories build on these conceptual perspectives (Arthur, 2008; Wolf, 2019), but there is no holistic framework to explore contemporary careers that conceptually ties these models together. Consequently, there is often a disconnect between individual’s and organization’s perspectives. The attempt of Briscoe and Hall (2006) to relate these theories did not stimulate significant follow-up research. There is, however, an ongoing debate about the validity of the boundaryless career model (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). While it has attracted significant attention and support (Arthur, 2014), opponents have highlighted its logical flaws and have offered contradictory findings regarding its scale and impact (Inkson et al., 2012; Rodrigues et al., 2016). The meaning of ‘boundaryless’ can be multi-dimensional; Sullivan and Arthur (2006) refer to both physical and psychological boundary components. It should be borne in mind that the term ‘boundaryless’ is a metaphor, not a pretentious or inattentive attempt to suggest that all career boundaries have dissolved. There exist, *inter alia*, professional, legal, cultural, and economical boundaries. Arthur and Rousseau (1996, p. 6) also refer to the role of the individual as the lead agent, yet the individual is one out of many career actors, and such actors interact to generate new meaning for their roles and actions in response to changes in the system (Baruch, 2015; Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). The role of individuals as career agents is prominent within both the protean and the boundaryless careers, as they pursue their aspirations and seek careers that satisfy their needs rather than follow an organizational system that controls and manages them in a regulated manner. Individualization processes in society are reflected in the multitudinous career routes and structures that have become the contemporary career realities for most people (Reedy, King, & Coupland, 2016).

Both models are relevant for the current study, as the paper focuses on the transition that is currently unfolding in the public sector, from traditional to contemporary career structures. These changes strongly feature elements of the boundaryless career model, and in this article they are captured from the perspectives of employees, hence exploring the protean career model: how employees experience the new career structures and manage their new responsibilities and challenges.

Another line of research that is relevant to changes in career structures is the ‘psychological contract’ (Levinson, Price, Munden, Mandl, & Solley, 1962). It is defined as a set of “individual beliefs, shaped by the organization, regarding terms of an exchange agreement between individuals and their organizations” (Rousseau, 1995, p. 9). It is therefore a key aspect of the relationship between employees and their organizations which conveys their mutual expectations, that are ultimately shaped by their career structures and career progression practices (Granrose & Baccili, 2006). Research has documented the momentous changes that have occurred in the psychological contract in recent decades, and the emergence of the *New Psychological Contract*, resulting from a shift towards contemporary career structures, as reviewed by Alcover, Rico, Turnley and Bolino (2017), Cullinane and Dundon (2006), and Rousseau (1996). Contemporary psychological contracts can be multi-directional, taking into account various factors and actors, and sometimes lead to idiosyncratic deals (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). While it is critical for organizations to avoid breaching psychological contracts (Robinson, 1996; Rousseau, 1996), it may be necessary to modify these implicit mutual expectations when the system is undergoing changes in order to accommodate the newly emerging career structures. This study applies the psychological contract concept to demonstrate how changes that are taking place in career structures impinge on the relationships between organizations and their employees, and the expectations that each party brings to the table.

The context of this study is also important, and we chose to focus on a unique type of career – the *diplomatic* career, often labeled as a ‘global career’ (McNulty & Vance, 2017) – that involves multiple expatriation cycles. In this context, individual profiles, career aspirations and preferences combined with organizational needs, policies and politics determine employees’ career moves. From a career perspective, the diplomatic career was characterized by a relatively traditional and secure career route that involves progression through a ranking system to reach ambassadorial and leadership roles. As they ascend this traditional career ladder, employees typically undergo several expatriation cycles, taking rotational positions between headquarters and embassies abroad (Berridge, 2010; Neumann, 2005).

Plischke (1979, p. 33) defines diplomacy as

*“the political process by which political entities (often States) establish and maintain official relations, direct and indirect, with one another, in pursuing their respective goals, objectives, interests and substantive, and procedural policies in the international environment...”.*

A diplomat is a person appointed by a state to help manage international relations with one state or a group of states (Berridge, 2010). Diplomacy is often portrayed as a prestigious, high-impact profession that requires unique interpersonal skills (particularly networking, communication, and diplomacy). It confers senior employees with significant responsibilities, unique legal entitlements (such as diplomatic immunity), a luxurious lifestyle, and many opportunities to travel to, and live in, diverse cultures (Berridge, 2010).

Given the complexity of diplomatic careers and the highly traditional global career context, a particularly intriguing question is how contemporary career structures unfold within this highly traditional global career context. The context is important as it can relate to the wider public sector, where talent management processes, as suggested by Rousseau (2015) and Crowley-Henry and colleagues (2019), may lead to a search for future leadership from non-traditional sources (not in-grown but recruited from other sectors).

The literature on the public sector indicates that in some countries the public sector offers more lucrative options, thus influencing career choice (Ng, Gossett, Chinyoka, & Obasi, 2016). Recent work identified no differences between the public and private sectors on some issues such as retirement patterns (Quinn, Cahill, & Giandrea, 2019). However, there are indications that those who move from the private to the public sector have higher prospects of promotion, despite the environmental and structural differences between the two sectors (Bozeman, & Ponomariov, 2009). This may influence individuals’ motivation to opt for specific employment (Rashid & Rashid, 2012).

There is a debate over the fit and relevance of theoretical perspectives embedded in the boundaryless and the protean careers to the public sector. Our study offers the opportunity to expand and apply these models to this context (Wiernik & Kostal, 2019).

As noted earlier, only scarce research has explored transitions from traditional to contemporary career structures within the public sector (Askim, Karlsen, & Kolltveit, 2017; McDonald et al., 2005). In this paper, we augment this strand of research through qualitative inquiry into diplomats’ experiences and perceptions of the changes that have occurred in recent years in their organizations’ career structures.

***Research Questions***

The following two research questions guided our inquiry into the changing career structures of diplomatic services:

Research question 1: *Are traditional career structures in the diplomatic service sector being replaced by contemporary structures?*

Research question 2: *What aspects of contemporary careers are being adopted in the diplomatic service?*

**Methods**

***Research Approach***

We adopted a generic qualitative approach to study the careers of senior diplomats (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). Informed by *the interpretive paradigm***,** qualitative research is rooted in *constructivist* ontology and epistemology. From a methodological perspective, in order to access the mental constructions that individuals attribute to events, our data were derived via dialogs between scholars and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Such a qualitative design has proven fit for this purpose (Low, Bordia, & Bordia, 2016).

Consistent with the interpretive paradigm, we used semi-structured interviews as a data collection tool; we relied primarily on participants’ descriptions of and reflections on the changes that had occurred in their organizations, and their interpretations of these changes. Among the reasons for choosing a qualitative methodology is the scarcity of in-depth research into the upper echelons of the public service, particularly the case of diplomats, where ambassadorial role clearly represents this level. Another is the recommendation that researchers “engage with those living the phenomenon and attempt to understand it from their perspective” (Corley, 2015, p. 2), particularly when the investigated phenomenon is undergoing change (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013).

*Sampling*

To explore the career paths of diplomats, we employed a purposeful sampling approach. The first author conducted interviews with 198 ambassadors. We were guided by theoretical and purposeful sampling principles (Pratt, 2009) to gain access to relevant informants who could offer in-depth understanding of the unfolding changes in their organizations. The key inclusion criterion was holding or having held an ambassadorial position; this ensured that the interviewee had attained a high position in the organization, providing a longitudinal perspective on changes that have occurred over time in their foreign office (FO), as well as in the diplomatic profession generally.

The sample therefore included ambassadors from four Western countries: the US, the UK, Israel, and Denmark. The aim of selecting four countries was to gain insights via international reach on career structure changes in FOs. We specifically targeted two countries with strong influence over global affairs (the US and UK), and two Western countries with much less global influence (Israel and Denmark). The sample includes only Western cultures as we wish to gain insight into changes in a common underlying culture. Future research may explore and compare the same for other cultures.

Participants were approached through networking and referral sampling (snowballing), a method often used when access to participants is difficult (Gutierrez, Howard-Grenville, & Scully, 2010). Welch, Marschan-Piekkari, Penttinen and Tahvanainen (2002) note that gaining access to elite global career informants is a major challenge, which may explain the scarcity of research into these populations. Therefore, they advocate referral sampling as an appropriate method for locating and accessing such participants.

The sample size was mainly driven by the need to reach data saturation in addressing the research questions. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), saturation is reached when fresh data no longer reveal new properties of the main categories; at this point, data collection can be brought to an end. Our sample size is far greater than what is considered the norm in qualitative studies (Saunders & Townsend, 2016). Three additional factors influenced the sample size: (i) the need to capture data across several age brackets in order to identify the career changes that have occurred over time in the ministries; (ii) the need to acquire sufficient cross-gender data in order to compare participants’ career patterns over time; and (iii) the attempt to avoid potential network-lock (narrowing of a sample to individuals with similar characteristics) as a result of the referral sampling process (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). This form of sampling differs from random sampling; the selection of contrasted countries and participants (influential vs. less influential countries, and male vs. female ambassadors) increases the ability to draw out clear distinctions across cohorts and organizations, thereby offering potential for deeper insights regarding such possible differences.

***Participants***

The sample of 198 ambassadors includes both recently retired (n=119, 60%) and active diplomats (n=79, 40%). In terms of gender, there were more men (n=158, 80%) than women (n=40, 20%), reflecting typical gender distribution across ambassadorial roles, particularly in the past. Indeed, Calin and Buterbaugh (2018) report that, among 603 career ambassadors appointed during the period 1993 to 2008, 469 (77.8%) were male and 134 (22.2%) were female. Accordingly, among the retired interviewees, there were only eight women compared with 32 in the active group, possibly reflecting policy tokenism (King, Hebl, George, & Matusik, 2010). The respondents’ age range is 38-67 years for active respondents and 67-82 years for retirees (although the majority were in their early seventies).

All participants had served at least once as state ambassadors and some had also held other senior positions in their respective FOs. All participants are or were employed by their FOs for most or their entire careers (active ambassadors had been employed for 26 years on average, while for retired ambassadors this was 37 years). On average, they had held between seven and ten positions since they began their careers (three to five positions abroad and four to five positions at home), but this also varied across countries, with Danish ambassadors mainly having taken positions abroad. All participants’ personal details were omitted from the presented quotes, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identities.

It is important to note that the divisions between cohorts and traditional and contemporary career structures are not completely overlapping. In the text, we use the term ‘retirees’ to identify the group who experienced the traditional structures in their own careers, and ‘active ambassadors’ to identify the group of younger participants currently serving and having experienced the contemporary structures in their own careers. The ‘active ambassadors’ comprises a group of younger participants who started their career within the traditional structures and experienced career change first-hand. Importantly, in the analysis that follows, both the retirees and active ambassadors discuss and explore past and present career patterns in their organizations, so their accounts are not limited to their own experiences.

Table 1 presents the participants’ profiles:

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***Interview instrument***

We used interviews to construct a historical perspective of the changes in the career structures that each of the FOs has undergone through recent years. Interviews were conducted face to face and audio recorded. They were semi-structured, and each lasted between 1:10 and 5:20 hours; some required two sessions, and most were held at the ambassadors’ residences or their offices.

The interviews began with general questions about diplomacy, how the profession has changed over the years, and how career progression occurs in their organizations, and ended with personal questions about their career path, their experiences in ambassadorial roles, their relocation experiences, and how they perceive the content and impact of their work. The questions were designed to prompt participants to reflect on their interest in a diplomatic career, their career progression, the benefits and challenges in their profession, their nomination procedures, and their expectations from their organizations in terms of career management (see Appendix). Much of our data draw on the interview section where the ambassadors were asked to reflect on how their profession has changed and how career progression occurs in their organizations. This prompted them to reflect on past and present patterns, along with changes and events currently unfolding in their organizations and profession.

***Data Analysis***

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Thematic Analysis. This involved seeking repeated patterns of meaning in the transcripts (Braun & Clark, 2006). We applied an inductive approach guided by the themes emerging from the data, rather than searching for data to confirm (or reject) pre-existing models or categories (Percy et al., 2015).

The first author coded the transcripts line by line. A third scholar then repeated the process for a data sample to test for external validity of the analysis and its interpretation. This involved deep engagement with the data through repeated readings of the transcripts and note-taking. Initial codes were identified and labeled by proceeding methodically through the transcripts and collating these codes into themes (Gioia et al., 2013). Repeating themes in the transcripts were then merged and defined. As several overarching themes and their sub-themes became identifiable, they were labeled accordingly. The authors then carefully selected the themes for this paper that related to the changes that participants observed in their diplomatic services over the years. Finally, the codes were arranged to bring together the main themes and sub-themes, as depicted in Figures 1 and 2 (see details below).

**Findings**

We identified two core categories, *traditional careers* and *contemporary careers*, with several sub-categories in each.

Under the *traditional career* category, we found the following sub-categories which represent the key characteristics of traditional careers as perceived by respondents: (i) career longevity and stability; (ii) linear career progression and hierarchal organizational structure; (iii) career success assessed by relative position within the organizational hierarchy; (iv) strong organizational identification and relational psychological contract; and (v) surplus in the system: the ‘on the bench’ position, where individuals are inactive while awaiting nomination to a new role (Neumann, 2005). The traditional career theme, its sub-themes and exemplifying quotes are detailed below, and a model that draws on these findings by representing the main themes and their sub-themes is presented in Figure 1.

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Within the *contemporary career* core category, we found the following sub-categories, which depict the perceived characteristic of the new career structures currently emerging in the diplomatic services included in our study: (i) Boundaryless organizational features; (ii) short-term contracts and dynamic flows of human talent; (iii) Protean career features, whereby employees take a leading role in their career management; (iv) fast career progression; (v) career success assessed by pace of progression and relative position in the organizational hierarchy; (vi) weak organizational identification and transactional psychological contract; and (vii) less surplus in the system: more exits and less ‘on the bench’ evident. Details of the contemporary career theme, its sub-themes and exemplifying quotes are offered below. A model which draws on these themes is presented in Figure 2.

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To exemplify the changes that occurred in career structures we have placed the Traditional career structures and the Contemporary career structure side by side, as these featured in participants’ narratives.

***Changes in career systems: From traditional to contemporary career structures.***

The traditional career model involves making a career choice at an early age and working for a single employing organization for one’s entire working life (Rousseau, 1996). Our data suggest that this was indeed the common career pattern among the retirees in all four FOs; the retirees tended to join their organizations in their early twenties, immediately after completing their undergraduate or postgraduate degrees. The vast majority had barely any previous work experience when they joined the FOs:

Ambassador Hanson (Denmark, active, male). *“There used to be a fixed pattern, early entry and life-long career, that has led to ambassadorship… Candidates joined the service immediately upon graduation from university.”*

With very few exceptions, almost all the retirees worked for their entire careers at the FO, and retired in their mid-sixties, at the statutory retirement age. The average number of years of service of the retirees was 33 and, accordingly, they described their career journey as a ‘career for life’:

Ambassador Gaon (Israel, retired, male): *“20 to 30 years ago the diplomatic service was seen as a career for life, so those who joined came in their early ’20s and expected to retire at 60- something… and this career was your entire work-life.”*

The benefit of this career pattern was job security and stability:

Ambassador Gold (Israel, retired, male): *“So at least you know that your career is secured for life. Yes, it’s not a great income, you will not get rich working here, but it’s guaranteed… and that gives you a sense of security that you don’t have in other careers today.”*

In contrast to the fairly linear and highly structured career patterns depicted by the retirees, the active ambassadors portrayed a career system that, for the past decade, has been undergoing a transition and is beginning to exhibit some characteristics of contemporary career models. The boundaryless organization model (Ashkenas, Ulrich, Jick, & Kerr, 1995) suggests that entry points to and exits from the organization are much more flexible than in the traditional career model, with a short-term employment contract becoming the norm. In line with this model, participants in all four FOs provided evidence to suggest that their organizations are gradually becoming more boundaryless, resulting in more dynamic flow of talent. The first sign of change is that diplomatic careers are no longer considered careers for life:

Ambassador Bush (US, retired, male): *“In the past people expected to have a life-long career… Today people look to five or six different careers.”*

The long-term organizational career outlook has been replaced by a shorter-term contract, and this is manifested through personal employment contracts that are being gradually introduced in some FOs (in the Danish FO). In these contracts, the starting position, salary and career progression are agreed upon at the outset. Furthermore, new entrants to the FOs are likely to be in their late twenties or thirties, with higher educational credentials, and often with some relevant work experience:

Ambassador Bergen (Denmark, active, male): *“All new diplomats and ambassadors are now on personalized contracts, not necessarily limited by number of years, but it is also not necessarily life-long. Salaries, for example, are different between ambassadors.”*

Ambassador Ball (UK, active, female): *“We take people on the merit of their competencies, …we check their leadership and communication skills… and someone who is older is more likely to bring what we are looking for.”*

Some participants also reported that new entrants are ready to leave early, to launch a second career:

Ambassador Sharon (Israel, active, female): *“When I entered the MFA, we had an understanding among us 21 cadets that it is a career for life. However, by now a third of us have left…. People today see it as an experience that they want to have – not a commitment for life”.*

Ambassador Fitzgerald (US, retired, male): *“Now they enter the Service not intending to stay 20 or 30 years. They may intend to stay 6, 8 or 10 years, achieve their objectives, and then go and do something else.”*

With regards to retirement, the US and Israeli FOs still impose a statutory age: for US diplomats it is 65 and for their Israeli counterparts it is 67. However, UK and Danish diplomats no longer have age-related restrictions on retirement:

Ambassador Cooper (UK, active, male): *“We have recently changed the law; there is no retirement age, and they can carry on to their late ’60s or even ’70s.”*

Ambassador Newman (US, retired, male): *“65 is the year of compulsory retirement, no matter how well you are doing.”*

Ambassador Hanson (Denmark, active, male): *“There is no mandatory retirement age, but most colleagues retire between the age 60 and 70. A few continue carry on past the age of 70.”*

These quotes suggest that the key manifestation of boundaryless organizational structures is through the more flexible entries and exits, and more personalized career contracts, and no long-term commitment. From the organization’s perspective, the contemporary career model affords the organization more flexibility in searching for and recruiting the human capital that can support their competitive advantage in their particular market. As noted, this pattern of employment is becoming prevalent in all FOs, although in some more than others.

However, these trends also have downsides, for example: departing the service earlier than retirement age means that valuable knowledge and experience are lost:

Ambassador Gilman (Israel, active, male): *“The investment [in terms of training] in the diplomat is huge and then there's the experience they gained on the job – and both are lost if he leaves…”.*

***From linear, organization-driven career to protean non-linear, individual-driven career features***

For the retirees, career progression followed the core characteristics of traditional careers (Arthur, 2008; Hall, 1976), since it occurred within the FO and was linear, gradual, and incremental.

From the organization’s perspective, the traditional model requires a hierarchical structure (with several layers), which would enable linear progression (Sullivan, 1999). Our findings revealed that all four FOs indeed adhered to such hierarchical structure which was both restrictive and competitive. Progression in the traditional career model involves competing for internal positions and progressing upward in the organization’s hierarchy, in accordance with employees’ length of tenure and achievements (Rousseau, 1996), which entails a slow pace of progression:

Ambassador Einhorn (UK, retired, male): *“There used to be a rather steady progression, where everyone floated upward in a steady pace.”*

Ambassador Fry (US, retired, male): *“In the past you were first appointed as ambassador in your mid-50s, having served some 20 or 25 years in the Foreign Office in various junior and senior positions…”.*

For the retirees, this meant that the FOs managed their careers by inviting them to either take a particular position or to apply for one. Accordingly, there was an expectation that the FOs would offer them a clear and relatively assured career course, which is another characteristic of the psychological contract in traditional careers (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2009; Rousseau, 1996).

The following narrative depicts the degree to which career moves were office-directed:

Ambassador Andersen (Denmark, male, retired): *“I have had a life-long career… it was the Ministry [of Foreign Affairs] that asked me to do certain things and to go to certain places… and I have always done what I have been asked to do.”*

Ambassador Gaon (Israel, male, retired): *“I held a secondary position in … (a Western country) and we were there for a very short period – barely settled in…. Then I was sent back to head office for a training, and while training, the Head of the… Department approached me and asked me to take a position in… [a Mediterranean country]. I protested… My wife didn’t want to move… But the Foreign Office put a lot of pressure on us, and in the end I took the position.”*

However, as can be seen in the quotes below, these expectations are currently changing (and this is noted by veterans who can compare past and current practices and expectations) as more contemporary arrangements are being introduced.

Ambassador Kendy (UK, female, retired): *“Up until 15 years ago our career was office-directed…”.*

Ambassador Ole (Denmark, female, retired): *“There was an understanding that this is a life-long contract that was informed by the office…”*

In contrast to these traditional career expectations and practices, the contemporary career model and its associated psychological contract features rests on the philosophical tenets of individualism; people choose organizations that fit their interests and values and enable them to fulfil their perceived career ambitions as and when they see fit (Sullivan, Carden, & Martin, 1998). Reflecting on this philosophy, several respondents noted that the younger entrants expect to and tend to take greater charge of their career routes, and make career choices and moves at various points, in accord with their personal circumstances and preferences.

Ambassador Jensen (Denmark, active, male): *“The career is definitely driven by the individual these days.”*

Ambassador Gardner (UK, retired, female*): “Now you ‘run’ your own career.”*

This adheres to the features of protean careers as described above (Hall, 2004), where employees form with their organizations psychological contracts where it is mutually understood that they expect to take charge of their own careers.

Yet, as the quote below suggests, we are witnessing career systems that are undergoing significant change, and although employees are showing some features of protean careers and their associated expectations, some respondents felt that the changes have not yet reached maturation:

Ambassador Ball (UK, active, female): *“On a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 is self-directed and 0 is office-directed, we are now at 3 and we are heading towards 6; we are definitely not aiming for 10.”*

***No change: Career success is assessed through attaining high status top positions by both cohorts. Young cohorts are seeing faster career progression than veteran cohorts.***

Interestingly, both retired and active ambassadors noted that they assessed their career success through the seniority, authority, or status of the positions they held. Hence, for both cohorts, attaining the ambassador’s position was considered the highest achievement. These are considered typical criteria for career evaluation and an aspect of the psychological contract in traditional careers (Heslin, 2005; Spurk, Hirschi, & Dries, 2019). These assessments diverge from the contemporary career model, in which career success is assessed through varied means, such as one’s accomplishment of organizational goals, fulfilment of interests, satisfaction, earnings, work-life balance, degree of freedom, status, or power (Heslin, 2005; Spurk et al., 2019):

Ambassador Abbot (US, retired, male): *“Promotion, more than money, is the objective of our diplomatic system, so the higher you get, the more satisfied you are... the dream of one day having your own embassy and going into retirement being called “Mr. Ambassador” is still one of the great incentives to people…”.*

Ambassador Levin (Israel, active, male): *“Once you enter the system, you are looking for progression all the time… Naturally in our line of work the highest position is the ambassador…”.*

As can be seen from these quotes, similar expectations for career progression are voiced by both veteran and younger diplomats, despite the fact that other aspects of the psychological contract (such as career longevity and security, responsibility for career management, level of investment, commitment and risk) are showing more contemporary career expectations (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019).

While this indicates that no change has occurred in participants’ perceptions on this point, our data suggest that because of the typical pyramid structure of traditional organizations, amongst both cohorts only a few employees were able to secure the top positions (Sullivan, 1999). Therefore, the promise of linear progression did not always materialize:

Ambassador Hanson (Denmark, active, male): *“It is considered a failure if you do not become an ambassador or a senior diplomat, and that's the challenge in our career, because we cannot all be promoted, because there are a limited number of positions.”*

Several participants made a point regarding the competition in their organizations:

Ambassador Berg (Israel, active, male): *“The competition here for internal positions is fierce, and it’s very difficult... It’s the hardest aspect of this career. There are so many intelligent and highly talented people here and… only few can get those top jobs; the rest will spend most of their careers at the bottom.”*

Ambassador Jones (UK, retired, male): *“There’s [now] a greater degree of competition from the very start between members of the Service, which I don’t think it is a very positive development.”*

Throughout their career, ambassadors experience many cycles of expatriation and repatriation. One of the most frustrating aspects of global careers is said to be repatriation (Baruch, Altman, & Tung, 2016) since, for many, “the return position is frequently a lateral move rather than a promotion” (Dowling & Welch, 2004, p. 166), entailing loss of status, autonomy and income (Dickmann & Baruch, 2011). Dowling and Welch (2004, p. 164) noted that “unmet expectations or unfulfilled promises... can provoke intense feelings of betrayal and violation of the psychological contract”. In line with these observations some participantsin our study had to make lateral or downward career moves, which they considered a career failure as well as a breach of the psychological contract (Robinson, 1996):

Ambassador Rosen (Israel, active, male): *“The main frustration is when you return from a mission abroad, and expect to be promoted..., but then you can’t, because the few pinnacle positions that you want are all taken... So you come back having been the ambassador somewhere with all the rewards and managerial power that it entails, and they offer you a head of project position... That’s very frustrating and difficult to handle...”.*

While the veterans were more willing to endure these lateral or downward career moves and the frustration that these generated, there were some indications in our data that, due to their short-term contacts, the younger cohorts are less willing to tolerate such career moves. They are also willing to leave if their aspirations for promotion are not met:

Ambassador Skov (Denmark, active, male): *“It is changing now… you are not guaranteed to become an ambassador. Now there is more mobility of moving in and out, and I see colleagues leaving to go to the private sector and international organizations and into academia.”*

As noted, the literature on protean careers provides arguments that career moves may not always lead to progress (Hall, 2004). While some career moves may result in upward mobility, they can at times involve lateral or downward moves which, in contemporary careers, are no longer perceived as failure (Lyons, Schweitzer, Ng, & Kuron, 2012). Such moves, if self-directed, may be perceived positively, but if they are mandated, as the case is with these moves, then they are unlikely to be viewed positively because they are not in the person’s control. However, as seen above, the narratives of the younger participants in our study do not align with these typical characteristics of contemporary careers.

Furthermore, contrary to our predictions, our participants witnessed faster upward career progression among the younger entrants to the FOs compared to earlier cohorts. They noted that while it usually takes some 15 to 20 years to become an ambassador, some of the new entrants who see their engagement with the FO as a short-term career, negotiated an early ambassadorial assignment as part of their contracts, and therefore were able to secure an ambassador’s post in less than ten years:

Ambassador Levin (Israel, active, male): *“The speed of progression is much faster… and therefore some people reach the peak of their career much quicker.”*

Ambassador Lewis (US, retired, male): *“Colleagues spend [now] too much time on the next job, scanning the pages of the Personnel Department posting reports, thinking how they can get in 10 years-time to be an Ambassador.”*

One of the key factors that has fostered faster progression rates among younger cohorts is their unwillingness to accept nominations in hardship countries. In order to incentivize diplomats to serve in such countries, some of the FOs have had to offer higher-ranking positions to those who are willing to assume these positions, thereby accelerating their pace of progression. The result of this move was the creation of a relatively young cohort of ambassadors. From the young diplomat’s perspective, the motivation is clear, since they can secure a top position in a very short span of time:

Ambassador Eldan (Israel, active, male): *“… since there are no senior candidates for these [hardship] positions… you have an absurd situation where relatively young diplomat are appointed as ambassadors.”*

*Ambassador Whitehead (UK, active, female): “…people who want to get faster to the top have to go to these [hardship] places.”*

This is in stark contrast to the retirees for whom serving in a hardship country was considered the usual and expected career path:

Ambassador Goodheart (US, retired, male): *“You had to be prepared to go to tough places, to serve under difficult conditions… at times to be target for terrorists.”*

Ambassador Gold (Israel, retired, male): *“In the past we went to hardship countries, and this was part of the deal.”*

***From strong to weak organizational identification and from relational to transactional psychological contract.***

One of the distinctive features of the traditional career model is the strong identification and relational psychological contract that employees have forged with their organization over the many years of their employment (Rousseau, 1995). This was indeed the case among senior participants who demonstrated strong organizational identification, dedication, and loyalty:

Ambassador Amiad (Israel, retired, male): *“I did my job with utmost dedication and loyalty, and I think everybody should do it in that way…You have to be loyal to the job, the country and the government…”.*

The psychological contract in the traditional career model entails employee willingness to offer long-term loyalty, diligence, and commitment in return for career stability, job security, and a fairly linear progression trajectory (Rousseau, 1996; Solinger, Van Olffen, & Roe, 2008). Our participants’ commitment and loyalty to their organizations was clearly manifested through their diligence and career longevity. The participants’ age, duration with the organization, and the fact that most stayed to retirement both manifests and strengthens their commitment. Such commitment is also displayed in their willingness to endure the downsides of the job:

Ambassador Gordon (Israel, retired, male): *“On a personal level I took grave risks for the country.… At least 3-4 times I was asked to go to countries with security issues… but I had no question whether or not to go…. It was clear to me that those risks are worth taking for the country, and that the purpose is important enough for me to take such risks.”*

In contrastto these strongly committed narratives, the literature suggests that the short-term, transactional career relationship with an organization, which is considered the norm in contemporary careers, results in a transactional rather than a relational psychological contract, which characterizes fragile vs. robust career ecosystem (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). People manifest low levels of obligation towards their organization (Janssens, Sels, & Van den Brande, 2003) and their motives are more personal and less pro-organization orientated:

Ambassador Hirsch (UK, retired, male): *“When people spot [now] an opportunity outside [The Foreign Service], they would do a secondment for up to 5 years, and will review their position towards the end of the 5 years… and sometimes they see that ‘the grass is green on the other side’ and they prefer to stay in the private sector.”*

Ambassador Gilman (Israel, active, male): *“Before, when you thought about the career in the Foreign Office as a ‘career for life’ there was more ‘discipline’: if you were sent somewhere, you went there knowing that next time you will be sent to a better place. Today diplomats are ‘sprinters who run short distances’; their requirements are for the ‘here and now!’”*

In this case, employees offer organizations short-term, diligent performance and productivity; in return they expect to gain career experiences and training tailored to enhance their future employability (Rousseau, 1995; 1996; Van der Heijde & Van der Heijden, 2006). Among our younger participants, there were indications of a weaker organizational identity and a more transactional psychological contract, which is manifested through lower levels of commitment to their organization (Rothausen, Henderson, Arnold, & Malshe, 2017) and could be the result of generational differences (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019).

Other quotes suggest that the younger ambassadors are less willing to tolerate the downsides of the job, that retirees accepted as a given. Three factors seem to drive younger cohorts to depart the FO early: (i) the personal risks involved in particular positions, (ii) the relatively meagre civil service salaries, and (iii) the negative impact on the career prospects of diplomats’ spouses due to frequent relocations:

Ambassador Fulbright (US, retired, male): *“Today there's lower tolerance for risk to family and children compared to when I was a young diplomat.”*

Ambassador Murray (US, retired, male): *“People tend to retire earlier because when you finish your career in the Foreign Service you are hard pressed to live a life of dignity if you don't earn some additional income…”.*

Ambassador Gross (Israel, active, male): *“Today, diplomats' spouses are quite educated, with the potential to have their own career, and they are forced to trail the diplomats from one location to another – which is a source of friction between the couple.”*

Ambassador Curtis (UK, retired, male): *“Conditions in the [Foreign] Service are far less generous [than before] … it might just allow you to provide a way [of living] that you would like for your family, but only just.”*

***The ‘on the bench’ phenomenon: From surplus in the system to*** ***less staff ‘on the bench’.***

A phenomenon related to repatriation that was observed in all four FOs is what has become known in the global career literature as ‘deadwood’ (Veiga, 1981) or ‘the drying loft’ (Neumann, 2005). To avoid derogatory wording, we use here the term ‘on the bench’. It describes those repatriates who return from their missions abroad but have not been allocated a position, and consequently remain unassigned for several months (in some cases longer). Several authors (Newmann, 2005; Carette, Anseel & Lievens, 2003) noted that these uncomfortable ‘in-between’ positions, are often conceptualized by employees as career plateaus, and can result in dissatisfied, bored, frustrated, and underperforming staff. Newmann (2005) noted the derogatory wording used by diplomats to describe these positions.

However, this surplus in the system does have advantages for the organization, that should be acknowledged. Firstly, it enables retaining highly qualified workers. It also enables the organization some flexibility that otherwise cannot be achieved. For example: it allows the organization to fill positions quickly when needed, which is crucial in emergency or crisis situations, when an assignment is quickly needed, or in positions that cannot go vacant for a long period without creating unmanageable back-logs or significant costs (Newmann, 2005).

The participants’ accounts revealed that all four FOs have had (and still have) some structural arrangements in place to deal with these situations. These included having a pool of non-assigned diplomats awaiting re-positioning (the US, the UK and Israel), offering returnees short-term assignments (Denmark, the UK and Israel), and allowing employees to take unpaid study leave (all FOs), or secondment elsewhere in the civil service (the UK, Denmark and Israel):

Ambassador Skov (Denmark, active, male): *“It happens to ambassadors who return to headquarter and there is no suitable position… they will be employed in what we call "floating positions" where they are assigned to different tasks.”*

Ambassador Dvir (Israel, active, male*): “It happens quite often even to senior ambassadors... and some find themselves “measuring corridors” [doing nothing] for a period of time. Some people may be assigned to ad-hoc jobs.”*

Similar to Newmann’s (2005) findings, our participants seem to use negative terms to describe these positions. These accounts correspond to the often-voiced critique regarding traditional careers (Inkson et al., 2012), where the rigidity of organizational structure and long-term employment contracts may result in ineffective and wasteful arrangements or appointments. These are difficult to change as they become entrenched in the organizational culture, and, as our data suggest, these structures indeed still exist in some form in all FOs. At the same time, our participants highlighted the flexibility advantage of these arrangements that enable quick assignments to various tasks.

The literature on contemporary careers suggests that flexible organizational structures and short-term employment contracts are more cost-effective than traditional structures, as employees can be moved around or laid off with relative ease (Brand, 2015). A significant question regarding the changes reported here is how they impact the ‘on the bench’ phenomenon (Veiga, 1981). As noted above, because exits from the diplomatic service prior to retirement age are now more common, one would expect this to reduce the number of unassigned people to a position upon repatriating, as they may choose to leave. Our data did reveal that ‘sitting on the bench’ is now less common, and time-restricted. Diplomats are now expected to find a position at the FO head office by ‘bidding’ for an internal position while stationed abroad, prior to their repatriation:

Ambassador Kennedy (UK, active, female*): “Initially you will try to bid for a job while you are still abroad, and if not successful, you will try to bid again while you are back in London. And if you haven't got it, then we have a system called “the corporate pool” that you will belong to, and you will be assigned to temporary jobs while trying to bid for another permanent assignment…”.*

This is a far more individual-oriented, proactive approach than in other public organizations (Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001). Consequently, the structures in place that enable staff to ‘sit on the bench’ until the next assignment is offered are less often utilized. Also, in the US, these arrangements are time-limited, and a continued refusal to assume available positions (which may involve a lateral or downward career move) may place the employee’s job at risk. Thus, the contemporary career patterns seem to have caused some reduction in the ‘on the bench’ phenomenon by reducing the number of diplomats awaiting assignment:

Ambassador Austin (US, retired, male)*: “There is a policy in the Foreign Service that if you are an ambassador and you are not reassigned within a certain time… then you are automatically retired… but it would be extremely rare that someone went for more than a year without assignments while actively looking for something to do.”*

**Discussion**

Our findings reveal the gradual breaking down of structures and policies that support traditional careers, and the emergence of new arrangements, guiding principles and practices that characterize contemporary careers. However, it should be noted that the picture depicted by our findings features characteristics of both traditional and contemporary careers; none of the FOs has yet transformed into a fully-fledged contemporary model (Arthur, 2008). Retirees and older active ambassadors perceived their careers as traditional, characterized by slow and incremental progress, and involving strong organizational identification and highly committed psychological contracts. They expected the organization to manage their careers and offer them clear and fairly assured career paths, although expectations of linear progression were not always met. This required organizations to have highly hierarchical structures and strict procedures in place to manage the internal job applications and placements.

In contrast to the orderly career structure portrayed by the seniors, the active young ambassadors describe a much more dynamic system. Being protean-oriented, they take the initiative regarding the planning and management of their careers. Careers are reportedly no longer for life, and young entrants may join the FOs at a later age and initiate earlier exits. Their shorter-term, transactional relationships with their organizations have led to less strong organizational identification and less committed psychological contracts; employees are willing to offer the organization short-term, diligent performance, but are unwilling to bear the downsides of the job unless they are offered faster progression in return. Accordingly, career setbacks, such as lateral or downward moves, are deemed a failure and a breach of the psychological contract and may lead to early exits. The need to adjust and adapt mutual expectations for resource investment by both sides has already been discussed in the past (Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992). FOs therefore no longer strictly manage their employees’ careers, but rather are expected to offer them choices over routes to professional development and progression that will fit their career aspirations. Career management has therefore unofficially become a risk-management process since FOs may lose their investment in employees’ training if they exit early. On the other hand, the combination of boundaryless careers and high demand for diplomatic careers enables FOs to recruit talent with much higher credentials and relevant work experience than before. Hence, they can potentially achieve a better match between employees and positions based on employees’ track record, using less targeted training. The traditional system enables good person-organization fit, as it relies on long-term ‘in-house’ training, development and monitoring along their career progress. Yet, relying solely on that system means missing on potential external talent that would not have access to the system.

In our cross-country comparison, we were surprised to discover similarities in practices and changes reported by participants. This could be explained by the strength of formal and informal networks in the international diplomatic community (Hafner-Burton, Kahler, & Montgomery, 2009), through which news of FO changes is quickly disseminated globally, resulting in the gradual convergence of HRM-policy on career practices (Bagdadli & Gianecchini, 2019).

Similarly, in comparing males and females, only a few differences were found in how they perceived the currently unfolding changes in their respective FOs. However, in discussing their own career trajectories, both veteran and newly recruited women perceived diplomacy as a male-dominated profession, highlighting the challenges they face in competing for senior positions. They also noted the challenges they faced in career paths that require frequent moves abroad as a requisite to progress. At times, these challenges stemmed from their family situations rather than from their organizations. Instances cited include husbands’ career aspirations or moves, pregnancies and childbirth timings, children’s health or educational needs, and elderly parent care. These all featured much more strongly in their accounts compared to the accounts of the men. Some were articulated as reasons for not competing for particular positions.

Interestingly, it seems that, among the retirees, spouses were more willing to sacrifice their careers to support their partners’ careers. As seen above, the retirees noted that while this was a significant sacrifice, at least their own careers were secured for life. However, among the younger cohorts, whose careers are no longer secured for life, both genders find it more difficult to disrupt their spouses’ careers. As seen, their unwillingness to bear the downsides of the job has led to faster career progression as well as early exits.

**Addressing the Research Questions**

Our main research question referred to the changes occurring in career structures and processes in the public sector, in the context of the diplomatic service. The career of a growing number of ambassadors began in non-governmental sectors and involved several moves, even across disciplines, in line with contemporary career trends (Bozeman & Ponomariov, 2009; Chetkovich, 2003). Such moves are not always easy due to potential cross-sectorial differences, and can also be risky (Su & Bozeman, 2009). Our findings suggest that the expected trajectories of FO career structures are becoming more contemporary, leaving behind old norms and behaviors (Foroughi & Al-Amoudi, 2020). However, this is a gradual process, and currently, all FOs still feature a mix of traditional and contemporary career structure characteristics. Certain characteristics and practices of global careers – such as length of time stationed abroad, movement from peripheral to central countries as one’s career progresses, assignment of senior diplomats to key countries, and assurance of employment to returnees – seem to retain some of the traditional career scripts (Cappellen & Janssens, 2010).

One phenomenon examined in some detail as a means of exploring the consequences of these changes was the ‘on the bench’ experience (Daraei, Ahmadi, & Faraji, 2015). The FOs do not apply an ‘up-or-out’ system. Having a period ‘on the bench’ does not impede one’s capacity to remain with their organization or to find a different and more suitable role within the public sector (Ghosh & Waldman, 2010). Our findings around this point offer an indication that the relatively flexible organizational structures and shorter employment contracts of the contemporary career model are seen as more cost-effective; employees can be moved around or laid off with relative ease, thereby reducing the prevalence of staff that are ‘on the bench’ awaiting deployment. However, we also found that those procedures for dealing with unassigned returnees remain in place, hence offering the capacity to assign people quickly to positions when needed.

We should note here that no data are available to us on the profile of employees who have left the FOs. As a result, we cannot identify whether it occurred as a function of the FOs not having an assignment waiting for their repatriating diplomats, or a function of the diplomats themselves not being proactive in pursuing opportunities. The onus of responsibility is therefore unclear, though it is likely to be a combination of both.

**Unexpected findings**

An interesting and unexpected point that emerged from the data pertains to the questions: *What drives the changes currently unfolding in FOs? Are these changes triggered by protean career-driven employees, or instigated by boundaryless career-driven environments*? Our findings suggest that the protean career characteristics of self-direction, the ability to change, and the will to explore alternative career paths that employees may bring to the FO seem to form a significant driving force behind the changes that have led FOs to become more boundaryless (see Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). Organizational career planning and management are changing, adapting to the contemporary career orientations that younger employees endorse. Early cohorts who have entered the FOs with more traditional concepts and expectations need to be able to adapt their career orientations to the new ideas and structures that are gradually becoming the norm in their organizations (Schoar & Zuo, 2017).

The case of the quick progression exemplifies this situation: People who are recruited at a later age, with higher levels of education and previous work experience, expect to progress rapidly in the ranking system, particularly since they consider the FO career as only one among several that they may embark on throughout their working life. Hence, entrants are less committed and less willing to assume positions in hardship locations, and are less willing to tolerate other downsides of the job, seen by earlier cohorts as a given. Since FOs find it difficult to fill such positions, they are incentivized to offer young diplomats quick promotions to ambassadorial positions, in return for service in hardship locations. As a result, the pace of progress among new recruits is faster than it was traditionally, and employees can reach the top – namely, to become ambassadors – earlier than was possible in the past.

**Theoretical Contribution**

Our analysis addresses a gap in the literature regarding the state of career systems in the public sector. The study offers a vivid depiction of contemporary career systems in four diplomatic services, through the lens of diplomats’ individual experience and perception. Through this analysis we contribute to career theory by identifying the ways in which careers are becoming boundaryless, and by providing evidence for the validity of the boundaryless model (Arthur, 2014). Our findings suggest that FOs’ career systems are becoming more dynamic, less predictable, and less rigid, in line with the boundaryless career model (Arthur, 2014), although not yet fully boundaryless in nature (Inkson et al., 2012). The aggregate dimensions identified by our data clearly indicate a shift from a traditional to a contemporary career system. The debate about whether the so-called ‘New Careers’ reflect reality or is utopic idea still exist, but we suggest that the truth is somewhere along a continuum where very traditional career systems and very dynamic and turbulent systems co-exist. We identified a shift from the past dominant system to a contemporary system, with clear distinction between the two (as presented in Figures 1 and 2). The findings should help the field realize where we stand, and conclude that the debate of ‘all change’ vs. ‘no change’ is a theoretical dichotomy, whereas reality is about a continuum of change.

We identified how different sub-systems in the wider career ecosystem interact and create more opportunities for boundary-crossing that were unavailable in the past. The findings illustrate how the changes in careers are manifested within the public sector, in line with the boundaryless career theory and the career ecosystem theory.

The traditional career system was characterized by: (a) job security; (b) career progression based on personal initiative in a restricted opportunities structure; (c) strong organizational identification; but (d) involves having surplus in the system to maintain job security. The shift is reflected in a new system, characterized by (a) short-term perspective job insecurity; (b) career progression based on personal initiative in a dynamic opportunity structure; (c) weaker organizational identification; and (d) less surplus in the system. These finding lend support to the expansion of contemporary careers (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009) from the private to the public sector.

We also address recent critique of the boundaryless career concept regarding its relevance and applicability (Inkson et al., 2012; Rodrigues & Guest, 2010). Our findings demonstrate that the boundaryless model *is* applicable to the FO case, and is useful for conceptualizing the changes currently unfolding in the public sector. Typical changes, such as the emergence of opportunities to transfer into a diplomatic career at later career stages, transfer from other disciplines, early exit, and remaining beyond retirement age, represent career boundary-crossing.

Our evidence also suggests that employees increasingly tend to hold a protean career orientation and are ready to take their destiny into their own hands, try different options, and no longer abide by past norms. People are open to starting a second career after early departure, and do benefit from this, as is evident in different sectors (Anderson, 2015). Our findings also reveal that the management of careers in the diplomatic services is now shared between the institution and employees, with individuals taking greater initiative and control than they used to (Hall, 2004). This strongly indicates that the changes from traditional to contemporary career systems that have been occurring in the private sector for nearly four decades are indeed beginning to emerge in the public sector.

This study also contributes to the comprehension of the connection between the boundaryless and protean concepts (Arthur, 2008; Lee et al., 2014). While the current literature tends to juxtapose these theoretical models, it does not explain the relationship between them (Wiernik & Kostal, 2019). Based on our findings, we propose that the boundaryless and protean career models are not only complementary, but also mutually reinforcing through what we term ‘a cyclical relationship’: The protean career orientation that employees may hold seems to be the motivating force behind the changes that propel FOs to become more boundaryless across the various dimensions of boundarylessness. This particularly applies to the psychological rather than the physical aspects (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006).

Another instance of boundary-crossing rarely highlighted is movement across sectors, as most studies on boundaryless careers refer to organizational boundaries. We expand the investigation of boundary-crossing to include this dimension. Cross-sectoral moves that were not an option in traditional FO careers have become feasible, and it is easier for individuals to move into ambassadorial roles even when joining the FO from another sector, whether public or private. That is, the move from traditional to contemporary careers in the diplomatic services seems to have taken a bottom-up trajectory. The changes to the FO career system encourage people with a protean career orientation to follow their chosen path, which in the past was suppressed. It has also become more open for more protean-oriented individuals to join the system. In a cyclical manner, being populated with more protean-oriented individuals, the system accepts new behavioral values and norms which include crossing boundaries that were not permeable previously. Further, the contemporary instrumental perspective of careers suggests that individuals with a protean career orientation will flourish in the boundaryless career environment (Arthur, 2008). Our findings confirm that this is indeed the case: new entrants to the diplomatic services are benefitting from more rapid progression that was not available to more senior participants within the traditional career model. We suggest that individuals with a protean career orientation will be better able to fulfil their career aspirations and planned trajectories in a boundaryless career environment. In turn, career systems will be less bounded when individuals’ career orientations like the protean type are accepted and encouraged. The global landscape for our study means that the findings also demonstrate how this cyclical relationship operates in the context of global careers (Baruch et al., 2016).

These changing career structures are also reflected in the evolving nature of the psychological contract, which has had to be adapted. The new FOs’ psychological contracts seem to be shorter-term and more transactional, hence resulting in lower mutual commitment, weaker employee identification with their organization, and lower willingness to take risks and make sacrifices, compared to the traditional model of the past. The challenge for the FO career system is how to avoid a fragile and non-sustainable career ecosystem while aiming to benefit from refreshing and diversifying the ways careers fulfil people in the sector (Baruch, 2015; Baruch & Rousseau, 2019).

Beyond career theory and organizational psychology, the findings are also relevant to the sociology of occupations, where professions previously considered bounded by silos become open to transitions (Adams, 2015). Such transitions can involve moves from the external labor market to specific FO positions, and even into high-level roles (Koch, Forgues, & Monties, 2017), and similarly, they can involve lateral moves from the diplomat service into other organizations within the public service.

**Managerial Implications**

Moving to a more boundaryless system where protean careers can flourish reduces the ‘on the bench’ phenomenon but increases the chances of redundancy. The message for individuals in the public sector, particularly in the diplomatic service, is to take charge of their career management and not assign responsibility entirely to Human Resources. This would also help improve managerial effectiveness, which is vital in the public sector (Cohen, 1998), as it allows for more freedom in managerial decisions relating to flow of talent in and out of the organization (Dries, 2013). While the FO may be a distinct sector, careers and their management share many similarities with other segments of the public sector; for example, when senior military personnel transition to a civilian career (Baruch & Quick, 2007). This means that although changing psychological contract is not simple and not a short-term fix, in the long term the service will continue with the restructuring of the psychological contract with its employees, including those in top positions. Like many institutions, individualization has to be acknowledged in traditional organizations (Bernstein, 2006).

Our study offers Human Resource managers an outlook of current career trajectories. The message to Human Resource managers and to other decision makers within the diplomatic services is to revitalize psychological contracts to fit a more dynamic system, and to offer broader training programs. Talent management is critical for sustainable people management systems. Idiosyncratic-deals (individual tailored arrangements – Rousseau, 2015) that offer non-traditional career paths are a way forward in many sectors, including the public sector. There is a much greater supply of talent to draw upon, and this expands opportunities to refresh the ranks. In the long term, this will produce a better talent pool from which to draw upon for succession planning. Well-formulated policies should be in place to manage the process of expatriation and repatriation, and offer long-term career planning (Baruch et al., 2016).

There is also further need for ‘risk management’ to maintain and nourish the talent pool. Risk management is a critical factor for the future of HRM (Becker & Smidt, 2016) and should be applied to career management too. When people adopt a protean career orientation within a boundaryless system, the risk for employers is loss of control and knowledge, and particularly the prospect of losing promising future executives. The advantage is the ability to acquire external talent, while releasing those who would otherwise end up ‘on the bench’. This forms part of the revised psychological contract within traditional organizational systems.

At the individual level, in the past, to become an ambassador, one had to endure rigid prescribed pathways (as a cadet, with slow progress within an office); in contrast, millennials and later generations will have more options for their future. Our study shows that the system can appreciate diverse potential talent and contributions and can allow different entry points to the pathways leading to top positions.

Last, regarding diversity, despite the need for so-called ‘symbolic representation’ (Riccucci & Van Ryzin, 2017), there were very few female ambassadors. This calls for improved representation of our diverse populations. Whereas in the past female ambassadors were a rarity, the move to equality may involve ‘token appointments’ in the first instance, and then wider gender representation in these roles over time. This may lead to a change in the way females approach this career and the strategies they apply (Bowles, Thomason, & Bear, 2019). Our sample had few females, but the situation is changing across the board, not merely in FOs (Calin & Buterbaugh, 2018). These lessons, both the relevance of opening the system to different sources of talent, and the use of greater agility in the management of careers, as well as improving diversity at the higher echelons within organizations, is relevant not merely for FOs but for the whole public sector.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

The study was conducted in one domain (FOs) of a single sector (the public sector). We interviewed leaders, although adding HR managers’ perspectives might complement our data. Also, all the represented countries are from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Future studies may usefully focus on other sections of the public sector and in other countries – in particular, non-OECD countries. Another limitation lies in our choice of methodology, which was qualitative and examined the outcomes of changes; however, we are yet to understand exactly how and why these changes took place. Complementary quantitative studies would help validate our findings. The challenges in undertaking quantitative data collection from such a high-level group include gaining access to participants and typical poor response rates.

**Conclusions**

This paper examines career changes unfolding in one of the icons of traditional civil service – the *diplomatic service*. We evaluate the degree to which changes are taking place, and explain the dynamics involved in the transition from traditional to contemporary careers. We have benefitted from an exceptional dataset, gaining access to an elite group that has hardly been studied before.

Our findings reveal that all the FOs in our study are experiencing elements of change, whereby contemporary careers are becoming the norm among diplomatic services. However, although all four organizations do currently have a mixture of traditional and contemporary career features, they can be regarded as having in place a contemporary career model. Our conclusion is, therefore, that the career system changes and their management by HRM that we have witnessed in the private sector for nearly four decades have indeed penetrated the public sector, albeit only partially thus far. Change in the nature of the profession leads to an inevitable change in its career system, and employers in the public sector may wish to embrace the change than fight it. This is certainly the case in this study’s four selected OECD countries, which benefit from relatively dynamic job markets. Similar changes and values may not be found in more conservative, restrictive labor markets – at least not currently.

Our analysis has also provided evidence to suggest that the transition from traditional to contemporary careers in the diplomatic services has a bottom-up trajectory: the protean career orientation that employees may hold upon entry to FOs seems to be the driving force that has led the FOs to become more boundaryless. This suggests that the changes that we have witnessed in organizational career structures may well be a result of responsive organizational efforts to adapt and adhere to employees’ contemporary career patterns and demands, rather than simply a mandated top-down change trajectory.

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**TABLE 1**

THE PARTICIPANTS’ PROFILE AND COUNTRIES

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Participants’ profiles and countries** | **USA** | **UK** | **Israel** | **Denmark** | **All** |
| **Male N**  **%** | 44  88.0 | 34  85.0 | 44  77.2 | 36  70.5 | 158  79.8 |
| **Female N**  **%** | 6  12.0 | 6  15.0 | 13  22.8 | 15  29.5 | 40  20.2 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Retired N**  **%** | 46  92.0 | 28  70.0 | 29  50.9 | 16  31.4 | 119  60.1 |
| **Active N**  **%** | 4  8.0 | 12  30.0 | 28  49.1 | 35  68.6 | 79  39.9 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Total no. of participants** | 50 | 40 | 57 | 51 | 198 |

**FIGURE 1**

DATA ANALYSIS: TRADITIONAL CAREER (PAST)

**Themes: Sub-categories: Aggregated**

**Career Career Dimensions:**

**Experiences and Characteristics Career**

**Perceptions Outcomes**

Job security and stability

* Career for life
* Joining early in one’s career
* Leaving at retirement age

Career longevity

Assured career course

Careers managed by FO

* Careers are directed by the head office

Linear career progression through organizational hierarchy

* Progression to senior positions is slow
* Progression requires holding several junior positions

Career progression –personal initiative in a restricted opportunities structure

* Main career aspiration: advancing through the ranks and reaching top positions
* Attaining ambassador position is considered the highest achievement

Career success is assessed through progression and holding top positions

Progression requires winning a series of internal competitions

* Internal competition on top positions is fierce
* Only few can get to the top

Relational psychological contract

Unmet expectations breach psychological contract but do not cause attrition

Strong organizational identification

* Willingness to endure career challenges
* Aspirations for promotion are not always met
* When there are no suitable positions upon repatriation, staff are assigned to temporary assignments

Surplus in the system to maintain job security

The ‘on the bench’ phenomenon

**FIGURE 2**

DATA ANALYSIS: CHANGES IN CONTEMPORARY CAREERS**\*** (PRESENT)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Themes:**  **Career Experiences and perceptions of change** | **Sub-categories:**  **Contemporary Career Characteristics** | **Aggregated Dimensions:**  **Career outcomes** |

Short-term perspective

Job insecurity

Loss of knowledge and skills

* *Short-term personal contract*
* *Later entry with higher qualifications*
* *Leaving earlier than retirement age*

Short-term contracts and dynamic flow of talent

Employees manage their careers

* *Careers are managed by employees*

Career progression –personal initiative in a dynamic opportunity structure

* *Progression to top positions is faster*
* *Younger people are appointed as ambassadors early in their career*

Fast and early non-linear career progression

Career success is assessed through pace of progression and holding top positions

* Main career aspiration: advancing through the ranks and attaining the ambassadorial role
* *Unwillingness to serve in hardship locations*
* *Lower tolerance to family hardship*
* *Lateral career moves less tolerated*

Less committed psychological contract

Unmet expectations may cause attrition

Weaker organizational identification

More exits, less ‘on the bench’ phenomenon

Less surplus in the system

* *‘On the bench’ phenomenon is less common*

*\*Changes in comparison to the traditional system are in italics*

**APPENDIX**

THE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What is diplomacy in your view?
2. What changes have you witnessed over the years in diplomacy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs?
3. In your opinion, what qualities and skills are required in order to perform the ambassadorial role?
4. Can you tell me about the career path that led you to your current job?
5. What training or formal education have you had over the years in preparation to become an ambassador?
6. How was the expatriation experience for you and your family? What have you and your family found easy or difficult?
7. How do you see your work? How important is it for you? Why?
8. What do you like about your career, and what do you (and your family) dislike about it? Why?
9. What were the highlights of your career?