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The Design of a Career Oriented Human Resource System

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Careers research recently has gained considerable prominence. Findings have far-reaching implications for the design of Human Resource (HR) practices in organizations. Developed in this paper is an integrated HR system that is career-sensitive. A set of system properties, or parameters, is offered that can be used in diagnosing and designing any system. Implications are given for the use of this framework as a guide for design and diagnosis of career-oriented HR systems. Future research areas are also suggested.

In recent years considerable interest and attention have been paid to careers and career-related phenomena in corporate America. Nowhere has this interest been more apparent than in human resource (HR) departments of large companies (Walker & Gutteridge, 1979). This heightened interest has resulted in numerous theories touting the importance of career planning to human resource management (Dyer, 1976; Hall, 1976; Walker, 1978). Despite the acclaim, however, little is known about actual company experiences with career planning or what career planning really means to individuals (Walker & Gutteridge, 1979). Further, very little is known about the impact of individual careers on the organization's HR system. The purpose of this research effort, therefore, is to organize and extend the impact that current career literature has on modern HR systems by the development of a taxonomy of career-sensitive HR system properties.

Current Career Thinking

A number of empirical and in-depth case studies have provided some insight into the ways in which careers are initially conceived and subsequently pursued, the way careers evolve over time, and the

ways in which individuals change during the course of their working lives as a result of their careers (Hall, 1976; Schein, 1978; Super, 1980).

Driver (1979) developed a career concept model that suggests that individuals possess different ideas about how their careers should develop. These concepts are based on past career movement and act as internal gyroscopes that appear to guide career decisions. This model and recent empirical findings (Olson, 1979; Prince, 1979) suggest that many view their careers as ideally consisting of a series of steps up an organizational ladder—the linear career concept. However, others view their careers as a lifelong commitment to a job or field—the steady state concept. Still others see their career as a series of infrequent but major shifts to new occupations or functional domains—the spiral concept. Finally, there are those who view their career as a series of frequent moves between jobs that are unrelated—the transitory concept.

Similarly, Schein (1978) attributes differences in the ways that individuals pursue their careers to career "anchors" that form the motivational foundations of career aspirations. He notes that some individuals organize their careers around themes of creativity and autonomy. Others are attracted to oc-

occupations and organizations that emphasize technical competence. Driver (1979) notes that career concepts appear to be integrally linked to key motives, or career anchors. There is some empirical support (Driver, 1981; Olson, 1979; Prince, 1979) to suggest that the steady state career concept may be based in the basic need for security and for a clearly recognized, valued role in society. The linear concept appears linked to the need for achievement and power. The spiral concept appears to be related to growth needs, and transitoriness appears to be motivated by the need for identity and challenge. Though still exploratory, the use of career motives in explaining variance surrounding career choices appears feasible.

In addition to motives, careers may be examined from a temporal perspective. Dalton, Thompson, and Price (1977) show how individuals frequently move through a series of career stages over time that involve substantive changes in the role requirements, as well as in the types of skills, knowledge, and work orientations that the role requires. Similarly, others have shown how work values and personal expectations and aspirations tend to shift in predictable ways as people move through successive stages of life (Gould, 1972; Levinson, 1977; Super, 1980). Consistent with this growing awareness that career orientations are susceptible to changes over time, researchers increasingly are focusing on the dynamic interplay that takes place between the types of work that an individual performs and his or her work values, temperament, and outlook (Brousseau, 1978; Brousseau & Prince, 1981; Kohn & Schooler, 1978).

Implications for Human Resource Management Development

These findings concerning careers have far-reaching implications for the design of human resource practices in organizations. Schein (1978), for example, spoke of the need for “total systems” capable of identifying, developing, and managing human resources throughout the entire career cycle. These total systems for human resource planning and development would include methods for linking various organizational and personnel functions such as strategic planning, human resource planning, performance appraisal, personnel assessment, and career planning in ways that facilitate the matching of organizational and individual needs over time.

Similarly, Driver’s (1978) career concept model serves as a framework for diagnosing and designing career management practices in organizations, and it requires consideration of a total system of organizational and personnel functions. The career concept model includes analysis of frequency of job changes, direction of the job change (i.e., vertical or lateral), and motives that guide the individual’s job and occupational choice. Therefore, to create and maintain congruence between individual career concepts and organizational practices, there is a need for long range, consistent integration in recruiting strategies, job assignment and sequencing methods, training programs, performance appraisal procedures, rewards, and organizational structure (Driver, 1979).

Typically, personnel and human resource practices change as the organization evolves, new personnel specialists are hired, and new policies and procedures are adopted. Consequently, the various functions that have been designed and implemented at different times, by different people, and in response to different needs may not operate in unison to achieve common objectives. As previously noted, numerous human resource functions are involved in the management and development of careers. Therefore, situations in which human resource functions do not fit together logically are at odds with the career development strategies that career theorists and career-oriented models suggest. If, for example, people were recruited for work on the basis of creativity, but are subsequently evaluated on accuracy, career problems would be likely to arise.

Current career management and development models promote a *systems* view of human resource management. When viewed systematically, the management of career development is not just another HR function operating independently of other HR functions. Instead, the management of career development is seen as a process involving organizational and human resource functions that collectively compose a system of interacting parts. Unfortunately, few conceptual tools exist to meet the need for systemic diagnosis and/or design of career-oriented human resource systems.

Most HR systems in reality are a discrete collection of components (i.e., recruiting, training, performance appraisal) and rarely have been designed from a “total systems” perspective. Walker and

Gutteridge note that of the 225 organizations they surveyed that have some type of career development/planning function, most of the HR systems have fragmented career orientations. They note further that:

By far the strongest factor associated with effective career planning is its integration with existing personnel systems. When such systems as performance appraisal, training and development programs, rotational programs, information systems and skills inventories, and management succession planning are in place and linked to career planning practices, the overall effectiveness is considered high (1979, p. 4).

Therefore, in response to this need for a systems view of human resource management, a basic HR system is presented here—a system with a set of properties or parameters that can be utilized for diagnostic and design purposes. The authors suggest how this framework can be used as a guide for designing a career-sensitive human resource system.

An Integrated Human Resource System

Figure 1 depicts a basic HR system, designed to chart essential information flows concerning the management of human resources throughout the organization. An integrated HR system is defined here as one in which HR activities are holistically interdependent and connected, each of which informs the design and implementation of particular activities. More specifically, individuals and organizational parts are aware of and are actively involved with each other.

This model was conceptualized as having distinct personnel as well as organizational functions. The circular components represent the traditional personnel functions most frequently dealt with by HR personnel. The boxes represent organizational functions not dealt with traditionally by personnel policies or practices. It is believed that the components represented in Figure 1 represent a minimal set of critical functions necessary for appropriate functioning of any HR system, not just one that encourages a career-orientation. These functions have been linked by arrows not to indicate causality but to indicate minimally necessary information flows between these components.

For example, in Figure 1, should the organization's *strategic plan* call for expansion into new technologies or markets, this information can be used to forecast for compatible expertise and career

orientations. *Forecasts* developed in this manner should be used to guide recruiting. When recruiting is predicated on accurate organizational forecasting information, the recruiting and forecasting functions become linked in this HR system based on the need for information.

Recruiting should be linked to *assessment*; the same criteria used in recruiting must be carried over to assessment. An integrated HR system also would assess these individuals according to criteria appropriate for career guidance and in accordance with the job analysis.

Organization and job analysis (a traditional personnel function) and *succession planning* (a traditional organizational function) should each impact *assignment* policies. This suggests that an integrated HR system should assign individuals to jobs, positions, and training based not only on assessment, but on what the organization plans for top management succession. In addition, assignment should be grounded in thorough job analysis that lends credibility to the assignment policies. In addition to informing the short and long run manpower forecasts, the strategic plan should be linked to *organizational design* and *job design*, two important organizational functions reliant on the organization's business strategy for appropriate integration. A fully integrated HR system considers these components and informational linkages, not based on individual concerns solely, but because effective and efficient systems must be informed at the organizational level as well.

Once assessed, the individual should be assigned to a particular job classification or sent to *training* to develop, upgrade, or learn new skills. Assignment is not identical to assessment. Assignments can be based on factors other than a person's assessed qualities (e.g., necessity). Training and assessment should be integrally linked; each supplies important information for the other.

Performance is the key criterion in this system affected by assignment of individuals to jobs. Performance most directly depends on the capability of the individual assigned to a particular job completing the task(s) at hand. Hence the arrow from assignment to performance. The *performance evaluation* results from performance and continues, along with the reward subsystem, to be the most controversial of all HR subsystems. This is so primarily because performance evaluation, when

Career planning enhances the performance of future assignments. It therefore should be linked to performance as well as training; performance planning indicates immediate performance objectives. Should the need for *job redesign* result from either performance planning or performance evaluation, the design effort also should be contingent on outputs from the previously mentioned HR functions and should inform the organization and job analysis component. Career/performance planning, rewards, and job redesign are exceptionally complex components of an integrated HR system. They have not been systematically dealt with, either by organizations in their hiring policies or by external agencies such as EEOC. As such, few prescriptions exist for organizations caught in the midst of the changing demographics of the work force. An integrated HR system must consider all of these functions as systematically and holistically interdependent with one another.

Enhanced productivity at the individual level should lead to enhanced project productivity. *Project productivity evaluation* should inform the organization's strategic plan and, as such, both ideally are linked to one another in this HR system design. Project productivity serves as one index of how the HR system is functioning.

In summary, Figure 1 represents key components of an integrated HR system. To show the impact of career thinking on HR systems, a set of dimensions characterizing properties of the system, or system parameters, is offered. The impact of career thinking is felt on these parameters, and not on the HR functions (recruiting, assessment, etc.) per se. These parameters are unique in their configuration and serve as the basis for systematic diagnosis of *any* human resource system.

Career-Sensitive HR System Parameters

The HR system of an organization, as previously mentioned, is viewed as having General System Theory (Miller, 1965; Von Bertalanffy, 1952) properties that here are termed HR system parameters. Human resource system parameters enable one to analyze any HR system, as well as design new HR systems. The system parameters most clearly linked to a career focus fall into four categories: (1) structure, (2) process, (3) boundary, and (4) human. These parameters are shown in Table 1.

Structural

Structural factors reflect a basic system property—complexity. As has been illustrated at the individual (Driver & Streufert, 1969) and the organizational (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1969) levels, structural complexity is defined to include differentiation and integration. Differentiation refers to the number of parts in a system and/or the degree of difference among parts. Integration refers to the connection among parts.

In the context of career-oriented HR systems, integration is viewed along two parameters: connectivity and consistency. Connectivity is the degree to which relevant information from one part of the HR system is used in other parts. When two functions are connected in some way (e.g., forecasting and recruiting), they begin to take on the characteristics of an integrated HR system. Figure 1 illustrates connectivity through the use of arrows. For instance, connectivity occurs when job analysis results in the screening of job applicants for job related traits, or when the use of training results in better assignment. In examining connectivity, it is useful to distinguish between formal and informal connectivity. Formal connectivity refers to any connection covered by explicit rules and procedures, whereas informal connectivity covers sporadic or spontaneous connections. By noting the lack of a formal connection, one can often detect weak links or troublesome spots in an HR system.

A second aspect of integration is dimensional consistency. This refers to how much an HR system uses a consistent set of dimensions across varied functions. For example, does the system select, train, and reward people on the same aptitude or personality dimensions? Does job analysis yield job dimensions that can be used to select individuals on matching personality attributes?

A second major structural system parameter is differentiation, operationalized here as system diversity. The diversity parameter is concerned with how varied HR practices are across units. Diversity also is concerned with the degree to which individual employees establish unique personal arrangements as are found occasionally in MBO or cafeteria-reward plans.

HR system complexity, then, is an interaction of connectivity, consistency, and diversity. In actual practice, many systems aim at simplicity because simple systems are inexpensive and do not require

highly skilled experts to design and manage them. The benefits of simplicity are obvious. The costs, however, may be substantial if the impact of careers on organizational performance is taken into consideration.

Process

All systems including HR systems are not merely static, but operate on input to produce output. Several process parameters deserve attention within the career context. The most basic process parameter inherent in the integrated HR system is termed self-reflexivity. A self-reflexive system is one that examines feedback on its performance and alters not only strategies, but also goals and objectives if warranted. Self-reflexivity implies collection of two forms of evaluative data: (a) data on the operating efficacy of the current function (e.g., evaluation of training program effectiveness) and (b) evaluation of employee, work, or environmental factors relevant to the design of new functions (e.g., surveying labor markets to design a recruiting program). The opposite of a self-reflexive system is a reactive system, which corrects only when things are seriously wrong. As with structural simplicity, non-self-reflexive systems have the advantage of less immediate costs and competence demands. However, HR system planners have noted that the long term costs of the non-self-reflexive systems become staggering.

A second process parameter is innovation. Systems may be self-reflexive but not innovative, using only tried and true procedures to examine their processes. Complexity of the issues HR systems must deal with often require the development of new methods. Off-the-shelf, widely used approaches simply cannot be expected to resolve unique and complex problems. But, here again, such an approach has cost and competence demands that must be considered.

The final process parameter is termed developmental orientation and refers to the nature of goals in the system. Some systems possess "status quo" goals, aimed at maintenance of the present state of affairs. Typical of these goals are maintenance of the labor force at optimal turnover, offsetting obsolescence, and maintaining current levels of productivity. A developmental orientation requires variable standards—that is, goals frequently are reset at different levels. Often these goals concern

increased complexity or self-reflexivity of the total system or its units. A developmental orientation refers to goals stressing maximum development of individual as well as organizational potential.

Boundary

Boundary parameters deal with the nature of transactions or connections across the boundary between the system and the outside environment. Two boundary parameters deserve attention: strategic linkage and environmental sensitivity. Strategic linkage refers to whether the HR system is linked to the organizational strategy function for dealing with the environment. There are many forms of strategic linkage. For example, a reactive strategic linkage is one in which the organization strategies dictate HR function outcomes and may treat HR system conditions as constraints on strategic choices. A proactive linkage is one in which human resources become positive inputs into strategic decisions about goals and plans of the whole system (e.g., labor or management competencies or values determine product decisions). To the extent that an HR system is not strategically linked, it may be buffered from environmental forces that may result in a lack of realism.

Direct environmental sensitivity is the extent to which the HR system scans and responds to external forces outside the organization (e.g., changes in labor supply, governmental regulations). Absence of sensitivity is referred to as system closure. A closed system is self-contained and ignores external phenomena. An open system allows external factors to penetrate the HR system. There are costs associated with either extreme. The present authors advocate a partially open system, which is consistent with the developmental orientation because it permits enough instability and pressure from the external environment to keep the HR system from becoming rigid (Jantsch, 1973). A partially open system also permits rational self-reflexivity (e.g., setting new goals based on events or trends).

Human

The final set of parameters specifically concerns human-based systems. These are human factor parameters, the most obvious of which is the degree to which the HR system is person centered as compared with organization centered. A highly person-centered system is concerned with the needs of each

individual employee. A highly organization-centered system is employee concerned only to the extent that the employees are instrumental in meeting company goals. Clearly, there are many middle positions, blending people and organizations differently (Argyris, 1962).

Resembling the person-centered parameter is a related parameter dealing with the extent to which the organization becomes involved with employee, family, avocational, and other nonwork activities (Evans & Bartolome, 1980; Sundby, 1980). With the advent of dual-career couples entering corporations, low involvement postures appear to be less feasible as a corporate strategy.

Finally, two parameters concern the HR system analysis of its personnel. The first, objectivity, refers to the degree to which people are assessed and dealt with in an objective, replicable manner, as opposed to the use of subjective and intuitive personnel judgments. Objectivity is especially sought by agencies such as EEOC, though counterarguments exist for the "social reality" of subjective judgments.

The second parameter stems from the first. The use of objective methods presupposes knowledge and use of behavioral science methods and theories (e.g., in tests). Subjective approaches often rely on common sense, though they may be informed by behavioral science knowledge just as some objective methods can bear little or no relationship to scientific inquiry (e.g., certain background requirements).

Expected Career Impact on HR System Parameters

The basic impacts of career thinking on system structure are presented in Table 1. One major impact of a career orientation is the increase in system complexity, especially integration. Because a career orientation focuses on employees over long periods of time, lack of integration in an HR system is inconceivable. In a non-career-oriented HR system, people are seen as short run assets. Therefore, a lack of *connection* between assessment and rewards might pose little or no threat. However, if it is expected that employees should be motivated and developed over time, each part of the HR system should be connected and consistent. In fact, the authors view a lack of consistency across the HR

system as a major contributor to career distress. How can a person (or an organization) engage in intelligent career development or planning when signals for success vary from one function to another (e.g., when a person is trained for precision only to find that creativity is rewarded in the performance evaluation)?

Table 1
Basic HR System Parameters
Showing Expected Patterns
Given a Career Orientation

<i>Parameters</i>	<i>Career Orientation</i>
I. Structure	
A. Integration	
1. Connectivity	High
2. Consistency	High
B. Differentiation: diversity	High
II. Process	
A. Self-reflexive	High
B. Innovative	High
C. Developmental orientation	High
III. Boundary	
A. Strategic linkage	High
B. Environmental sensitivity	High
IV. Human	
A. Person vs. organization centered	High
B. Nonwork focus	High
C. Objectivity	Moderate
D. Use of behavioral science	Moderate

Diversity is also expected to be high in a career-oriented HR system because individuals appear to possess different career orientations (Driver, 1979; Schein, 1978). Uniform assumptions about employees have led many organizations to treat all individuals equally, though not necessarily equitably. General panaceas often have led to outcomes that fall so far short of so many peoples' needs that they react with aversion to any new approaches. In a career-oriented HR system, the establishment of tolerance of individual diversity is a prerequisite to effective outcomes.

Concerning the process parameters highlighted in Table 1, a career-oriented HR system would most likely be both self-reflexive as well as innovative. Because individual career patterns change over one's life stages (Dalton et al., 1977), a career-oriented HR system is likely to be self-reflexive. Only self-reflexive HR systems can alter policies and procedures as needed in anticipation of work force changes. Like self-reflexivity, innovation also seems necessary inasmuch as career patterns appear to be evolving in new directions (Driver, 1981; Hall, 1976; Von Glinow, 1982) that require new pro-

cedures (e.g., new structures to accommodate career-oriented individuals).

A developmental orientation seems equally essential in a career-oriented HR system (Brousseau, 1978; Brousseau & Prince, 1981). Development is focused primarily at the individual level, though an integrated HR system is concerned with organizational development as well. There are, however, certain persons who are not particularly in need of development. These pockets of stasis amidst development are simply reflective of the HR system's tolerance for diversity, and as such they differentiate the uniqueness of this integrated HR system from others.

A career-oriented HR system needs to be closely linked to the organization's business strategy. Career aspirations can hardly be met if strategic needs and career needs are not synchronized. If people, for example, with long term stability orientations are integrated into an operation whose strategy is to develop short term projects, dysfunctional outcomes would be expected.

Environmental sensitivity would need to be partially open in a career-oriented HR system. New trends in labor markets, work values, and personnel practices obviously must be incorporated. Excessive openness is not advocated, however, because continuity of practice is vital, particularly to certain career orientations.

In a career-oriented HR system, an orientation that includes both individual and organizational interests seems essential. For careers to be meaningful at the organizational level, they cannot be exclusively person-centered or organization-centered. It is significant that organizations that do not attend to promotional and career opportunities run risks such as withdrawal and decreased performance as well as turnover (Mohrman & Von Glinow, 1981). Inattention to career forecasting may prompt a totally ineffective long term strategy. Similarly, a purely organization-centered HR system can significantly alienate both white- and blue-collar workers.

Nonwork factors are intricately intertwined in a career-oriented HR system. Careers have evolved for reasons other than the Protestant work ethic (Evans & Bartolome, 1980). Clearly, there are trade-offs among work, family, avocation, and marriage that must be sensed and responded to by the career-oriented HR system.

Pure objectivity in the HR system is not advo-

cated, because subjective factors often are critical to career success. Creativity and subtlety often argue in favor of greater subjective approaches. However, purely subjective systems are not advocated, because of problems such as perceptual bias, occasional lapses of system equity, and lack of realism. Therefore, a system that combines both subjective and objective methods of evaluation in a self-reflexive manner, aimed at maximum effectiveness, appears most appropriate to a career-oriented HR system. Finally, attention to behavioral science seems to be an essential requirement for a career-oriented HR system. The behavioral sciences are helping to provide "informed choice" and essential tools for person, job, and organizational analysis (Weiss & Bucuvalas, 1980).

Conclusions and Implications

In an attempt to extend current thinking on the need for integration within the HR function, an integrated HR system with system parameters that is career-oriented has been developed. In addition, the system parameters presented are offered as both a diagnostic and a system design aid. The use of the parameter analysis in enriching applied and theoretical HR system thinking has several implications and suggestions for future use. In terms of practical suggestions for HR system designers, the parameter analysis can be used:

1. As a measurement and diagnostic tool to examine any system within the organization (e.g., HR system, control system).
2. To design specific decision subsystems (e.g., management identification and development) within the overall HR system.
3. To design HR systems that are maximally sensitive to internal and external demands (e.g., environment, individual careers, organizational concerns of efficiency) through attention to system parameters.
4. As a tool for longitudinally tracking individual career change. Similarly, such analyses can be used to change the system and the individuals within that system over time. The usefulness of a careers perspective allows practitioners to establish conditions suitable for individual change to occur, which otherwise may not be amenable to monitoring (e.g., creating conditions whereby individual careers are encouraged to change within the framework of career concept diversity).
5. As a basis for initially measuring the individual's perception (e.g., of career planning) and subsequently comparing that perception with the objective properties of the system.

In terms of future research, two essential questions are suggested by the career sensitive HR system described:

1. Do the parameters described in Table 1 lead to more effective career management in organizations?
2. Does more effective career management lead to enhanced individual performance and organizational productivity?

These research questions serve as a preliminary basis on which to begin testing hypotheses relating to effective career management. This taxonomy of expected patterns, given a career orientation, serves as an initial guide to allow researchers concerned with "total systems" as well as individual careers to begin to structure research through a multilevel,

multiparameter analysis.

Such diagnosis and design of career-oriented systems is a lengthy process best conducted through longitudinal inquiries and not particularly amenable to cross-sectional research using only paper and pencil tests. It should be noted that the integrated HR system and parameter analysis represents a general analytic approach designed for analysis of any system. The career configuration is but one configuration of this general analytical approach. Clearly, future research is needed in the design of career-oriented human resource systems in organizations.

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