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Social Networks, Learning, and Job Attainment in Career Changes

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Research question

This dissertation explores the process by which individuals gain entry into jobs different from those previously held. How people hear about new openings in the same area of work is a familiar area of exploration (Granovetter, 1995). But how people gain entry in an area of work different from what they did before – what I call career changes - , is different and relatively unexplored. Consistent with recent work on career mobility (Podolny and Baron, 1997; Ibarra, 1999), in my dissertation I approach career changes from a social networks perspective. But the mechanisms I explore are cognitive in nature. I address two research questions: “What are the key social psychological mechanisms by which networks influence job attainment in career changes?” and “What network characteristics are then beneficial for job attainment in career changes?”

Rationale

Interest in understanding how careers unfold across organizations and occupations has recently increased (Hall, 2002; Ibarra, 2003). However, these efforts have focused almost exclusively on the subjective aspects of this process, and less on the drivers of objective success measures such as job attainment. On the other hand, researchers examining how people achieve career mobility have usually focused on how networks of relationships affect status or income attainment in the broad labor market, entry into organizations, or promotion contests within the firm, without particular regard for the cases where a career transition, and not just a job change, was at play (Granovetter; 1995; Lin, Ensel, & Vaughn, 1981; Podolny & Baron, 1997; Yakubovich, 2005). Moreover, studies that look in depth at the mechanisms that lead to job

attainment have been few and far between, and tend to be one-firm case studies (Fernandez & Weinberg, 1997). This brief review suggests that both the fine-grained process by which job attainment in career changes happens, and the social structural drivers that matter most for success, are not well understood so far.

I argue that these are important questions to explore because career changes are complex phenomena with qualitatively different features than looking for a job in the same work domain. In this work, I define career change as the simultaneous change in employer and work role, along with the subjective perception that such changes constitute a career change (Higgins, 2001; Ibarra, 2003). Job attainment in career changes is particularly difficult to accomplish, not only because job opportunities are not readily available to the job seeker, but also because job seekers need to overcome recruiters' bias against their lack of experience in the desired work domain. Hiring happens according to rules that employers use to classify candidates into appropriate or not for the position (Bielby & Bielby, 1999). To avoid uncertainty regarding abilities, recruiters tend to hire those who have done the same job before: gaining entry into an arena is helped by a focused labor market identity that shows expertise in that arena only (Zuckerman, Kim, Ukanwa & Rittman, 2003). Markets thus encourage reproduction of focused labor identity – the so-called typecasting effect. Typecasting is difficult to break out of, and serves to reinforce the existing career categories and boundaries.

By focusing on the social psychological mechanisms by which individual overcome typecasting, my dissertation contributes to the emerging literature on the role of individual in structural analysis (Kilduff and Krackhardt, 1994; Ibarra, Kilduff, & Tsai, 2005). By introducing individual-level constructs such as identity, goals and strategies into the analysis of the impact of networks on career changes, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the role of individual action in the enactment of structures of constraint and opportunity.

Theoretical model

Career changes, like mobility in general, can be usefully understood through the lens of social networks. Podolny and Baron (1997) document that social relationships convey two different types of content - resources and identity - that matter for promotion. The distinction between the two benefits of social relationships, resources and identity, applies equally well to career changes. My theoretical base remains with people's networks. But the mechanisms I explore are cognitive in nature: I focus on pre-entry job learning and identity development. This is not to say that direct opportunities provision (via influence) is not equally important for job attainment. But I focus on the cognitive mechanisms by which relationships make a difference in career mobility because these aspects have been much less explored so far.

The argument I build is that actors attempting to enter radically different work areas engage in gathering the appropriate job knowledge (job learning) and refining their professional identity in an attempt to make sense of the transition between past and future jobs in a coherent, logical way (identity clarification). They do so via the social resources they draw on for support and information. In other words, I propose that job knowledge and identity clarity are the key intermediary variables that lead from social relationships to job attainment in career changes.

In particular, I propose that social relationships matter differently for job knowledge acquisition and for identity clarification. For job knowledge acquisition, redundancy across contacts (defined as little diversity in contacts' professional background relative to the job pursued) leads to better knowledge of the particular job and hence higher likelihood of job attainment. For identity clarification, on the contrary, diversity of contacts (as given by contacts' professional background) is more beneficial than redundancy. This is because a more diverse pool of contacts is more likely to be beneficial for the variation, selection and clarification of identity possibilities (Ibarra, 1999). In addition, there is an interaction effect between job

knowledge and identity clarity: identity clarity moderates the extent to which redundant contacts are helpful for job knowledge acquisition. Contacts are more likely to provide in-depth information when they judge the candidate at career change coherent and realistic in her efforts.

Finally, I argue that another important driver of job attainment is the interaction between network characteristics and individual-level characteristics such the strategies employed for pursuing the career transition. I propose that two different individual-level career orientations moderate the types of relationships that matter most for the identity clarification process.

Proposed methods

I am conducting my empirical work on MBA participants in a top international business school. They are a homogeneous set in terms of education and professional success levels, yet present substantial variation in terms of experience background and desired work positions. Most of them attempt to enter jobs different from those previously held but not all of them succeed. The MBA at this school last for one year only, and two cohorts enter the program each year (one in September and one in January). I am collecting data from two MBA cohorts, and my target sample size is 200 respondents.

I initiated my data collection with exploratory in-depth interviews with over 30 MBAs, MBA alumni, MBA career coaches, and recruiters. My main data sources are three customized online surveys that I designed, pre-tested and piloted before implementation. The surveys are distributed at three points at time: at the start of the MBA program, two months prior to graduation, and after graduation. I am also conducting in-depth interviews with participants to supplement the quantitative findings. In addition, I am collecting data from a number of other sources: MBA admissions office (for educational variables and prior job experience); the CV book; and the school's career services center (for variables related to participation in on-campus recruitment).

My dependent variable is having (at least) one job offer in the kinds of jobs actively pursued. I assess this at graduation and three months later for those who did not have an offer at graduation time. I collect information on the kinds of jobs actively pursued two months prior to graduation, when the job search period is at its peak for most people. I assess job learning in two ways: through self-reported measures adapted from the socialization literature, and coding the resumes in the CV book. I assess identity clarification by the change in the number and range of possible selves (measured with instruments adapted from the possible selves psychological literature), and network characteristics through an ego-centric network questionnaire.

Results

So far I have collected responses to the first and second surveys from one cohort, and responses to the first survey from the second cohort. The first wave of outcome data is expected by August 2006. I expect to have collected the last outcome data by March 2007.