CAREER TRANSITION: EXPLORING LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES FOR MAJOR CAREER CHANGES IN MID-CAREER

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Abstract: This study examines the processes of mid-career career restructuring among Indian professionals. Using examples from two distinct cases, the study illustrates the development of a model that supports labour market transitions through lifelong learning, particularly during career transitions away from initial occupational identities. The study examines career reconceptualization processes from three perspectives: identity development, affective and cognitive development, and relational and practical development. This study's paradigm can be utilised to educate individuals and organisations about career transitions and the significance of learning and development processes in facilitating these transitions.

Introduction

A model of occupational identity formation was developed to understand the process of initial skill formation. This model emphasises that the process of developing occupational identities and narratives are ongoing and interactive, and never complete (Brown, 1997). Recent research has further developed this model to accommodate the different ways in which learning can support labour market transitions throughout an individual's life-course. The model highlights two complementary ways in which learning can facilitate career and labour market transitions: as a process of identity development, as a process of development in four interrelated domains, and as taking place within the context of particular opportunity structures (Brown & Bimrose, 2014).

This model will be used to analyse two cases of mid-career identity development and career reframing. These cases will be viewed as a process of identity development, involving relational, emotional, practical and cognitive development within the particular opportunity structures of India. Before analysing the cases, it is helpful to understand the broader context of mid-career identity development and career reframing.

Mid-career identity development and career reframing are important aspects of career transitions. As individuals progress through their careers, they may experience shifts away from their initial occupational identities, which require new skills and competencies (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012). Career reframing involves an individual's active effort to create new career opportunities by redefining their skills, knowledge and experiences in a way that is relevant to the current labour market (Menzies, 2006). This process of career reframing can involve developing new skills and competencies through learning, networking, and engaging with different opportunity structures (Brown & Bimrose, 2014).

The process of mid-career identity development and career reframing can be complex and multi-dimensional. The development of a new career identity may involve a variety of factors, including relational, emotional, practical and cognitive development (Brown & Bimrose, 2014). Relational development involves building new networks and relationships within the labour market, while emotional development may involve coping with the emotional challenges of career transitions. Practical development involves developing new skills and competencies, while cognitive development may involve learning new ways of thinking about career opportunities (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012).

In the Indian context, mid-career identity development and career reframing are becoming increasingly important as the country undergoes significant economic and social changes. The Indian labour market is experiencing a shift away from traditional industries towards service and knowledge-based industries, which require new skills and competencies (Gupta & Krishnan, 2016). Career reframing is therefore crucial for individuals who wish to remain relevant in the changing labour market. Additionally, the Indian workforce is becoming more diverse, with individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds and educational levels entering the labour market (Rao & Taneja, 2017). This diversity creates new challenges and opportunities for mid-career identity development and career reframing.

In conclusion, mid-career identity development and career reframing are important aspects of career transitions that require ongoing learning and development. The model of learning for career and labour market transitions provides a framework for understanding the multi-dimensional nature of these processes. In the Indian context, mid-career identity development and career reframing are becoming increasingly important as the labour market undergoes significant changes. The two illustrative cases analysed in this article will provide insights into the process of mid-career identity development and career

reframing in India, highlighting the importance of developing new skills and competencies, building new networks and relationships, and engaging with different opportunity structures.

Mid-Career Identity Development and Career Reframing

As individuals progress through their working lives and establish a stable occupational identity, they may only make minor adjustments to their career narrative (McAdams, 2001). However, during times of significant career change, individuals may need to fundamentally reframe their career story. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) argue that in these circumstances, a deeper understanding is needed of how individuals use narrative to develop a sense of continuity between who they have been and who they are becoming. Specifically, little attention has been paid to how individuals create work identities that deviate from socially scripted or highly institutionalized trajectories (Ashforth, 2001). As non-linear careers become more common, understanding the ways in which people construct, change, and reframe their career identities becomes increasingly important (Brown & Bimrose, 2010; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006).

When individuals are seeking to change career direction, they are often not only focused on the future but also seek to make sense of their career story as a whole. In doing so, individuals reflect on their past experiences, anticipate possible futures, and seek to present a coherent career narrative (Savickas, 2013). Joint construction of identity highlights the importance of significant others at different times during one's life, including during key development periods, to validate aspects of a developing identity and in sharing evolving identity stories (Savickas, 2013).

Narrative theories of identity emphasize how building a sense of ourselves, which others may share, relies largely on the narratives we construct. In developing and transforming occupational identities, individuals prioritize certain episodes from their varied experiences and give these episodes special significance by incorporating them into their strategic career stories. Any significant changes in work roles, relationships, and environment may lead to a transitional phase that challenges how individuals and others perceive their occupational identities. Individuals may respond by constructing new narratives, adapting and/or discarding aspects of older ones that seem less relevant to the changed context. This process, involving "the decomposition of existing identities into their constituent components and their recombination into a new identity" (Carruthers & Uzzi, 2008, p. 486), also has an explicit social dimension. The recognition and validation of an emergent new narrative by others is important to one's own major role transitions. These actions and interactions involve what Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) label as "narrative identity work" as they involve "social efforts to craft self-narratives that meet a person's identity aims" (p. 137).

Identity work has rational and affective dimensions, driven by thinking as well as feeling and intuition. Identities and narratives are never complete; they are always emergent, capable of being transformed in a dynamic and interactive way within the contexts in which they are developed (Brown, 2015). As occupations change, occupational identities shift, and even within a relatively stable occupation, role changes can mean that occupational identities also evolve. The way in which individuals negotiate such transitions can act as a stimulus to the meaning-making aspect of their career biographies (Alheit, 1992). Occupational identities have multiple facets, evolve, and are influenced by interactions with others (Goffman, 1959), but are also underpinned by the pressures within a self to integrate diverse experiences into a meaningful unity (Markus & Wurf, 1987).

Case Description -I

Mangesh is a male in his mid-thirties working in a BPO in India. He has an impressive skill set characterized by both depth and breadth. His studies comprised a degree in English literature at university (3 years) and later in his career, he completed an MBA in operations. He started his career as a customer service executive and worked his way up to a team leader position. However, he had a hard time managing his team, and he decided to take a break from his job and explore other opportunities.

During his break, Mangesh discovered his interest in training and coaching. He joined a training institute and completed a course in communication skills training. It was a great experience, on which he tried to capitalize immediately. He came back to his job and established himself as a communication skills trainer within the BPO. The work was very interesting, giving him the opportunity for challenging work, including a variety of interactions with people which made use of both analytical and inter-personal skills.

"It was so interesting, I had to deal with very important issues like customer satisfaction and quality improvement, regarding the team's performance. I discovered the Sherlock Holmes in me, but I was also incredibly happy in helping my team members improve their communication skills. It was so gratifying at the human level."

The work environment was also very good. His manager was a woman with a wide variety of interests (also holding an MBA in HR), and very open to innovative forms of management.

"I learned a lot from her. She was that kind of person who reads lots of books, who loves to improve herself, who really cares about others and values their opinions. The beautiful thing in that office was that they were able to put my creativity into practice. The 'team meetings' were not just for subscribing to the boss' decisions, which is almost the rule in many work settings, but for really challenging everybody's abilities in finding solutions. We transformed a previously disorganized team in an organized workflow...I really felt myself as part of the game...I even felt like a coach for my team members...I

discovered that I was interested in what I was doing, much more than in the amount of my salary...I felt as if that was the first real job I had in my life."

Mangesh also had the opportunity to do some training in his free-time, coaching his friends and colleagues in their communication skills. His enlightened managers were among the audience. He spent a total of 5 years in that optimal condition. Then he applied for a vacancy for the same job with the same BPO in another department, and his life changed again. His new managers' mindsets were very different from those encountered in his previous department. His interests outside work were deemed as attempts to undermine work commitment. Working practices were dealt with in rather bureaucratic ways.

"I found a very 'Indian' way of thinking in the new department. I began to think I had made a mistake in coming there. In the end, I made that choice not being really convinced that it was good, but mostly driven by the idea that this could have been the last chance of getting into another department...There were many things to change in that department, and I frequently tried to advocate for good solutions learned in my previous experience, but I mainly received frustrating answers. Once a colleague of mine said 'Get over it, you're not in your old department anymore'."

The crisis with the work in the new department worsened, and after almost 3 years, he decided to quit that job, which created further problems as it was quite unwise to lose such a sought-after job. Mangesh had a crisis about his future work direction, and he took a sabbatical first and then an unpaid leave of absence. During such leave, he went back to his home town. At present, Mangesh is in his mid-30s and works in a BPO in Mumbai, India. He has a degree in English Literature from a university in Mumbai and has been working in the BPO industry for over a decade. He started as a customer service representative and has worked his way up to a team leader position.

Mangesh has always had a love for languages and literature, and he finds that his degree has helped him in his work in the BPO industry. His excellent communication skills and language proficiency have helped him to communicate effectively with clients from around the world.

Mangesh has also developed an interest in project coordination and management. He has been involved in several projects within his company, including the implementation of new customer service procedures and the training of new employees.

One of Mangesh's most rewarding experiences in his career was when he was given the opportunity to work on a special project for a high-profile client. The project involved coordinating with teams from different countries and involved a lot of cultural mediation. Mangesh found the experience to be challenging but also very fulfilling.

Mangesh's current manager is also someone who values innovation and creativity in management. He encourages his team to come up with new ideas and solutions, and Mangesh finds this to be a refreshing change from some of his previous managers who were more focused on bureaucratic processes.

However, Mangesh has also faced some challenges in his career. He has had to deal with managers who do not value his interests outside of work and who see them as distractions. He has also had to deal with bureaucratic work practices that can be frustrating and hinder his ability to be creative and innovative in his work.

Despite these challenges, Mangesh remains committed to his work in the BPO industry and is always looking for new opportunities to develop his skills and advance his career. He is currently exploring the possibility of taking some courses in project management to further develop his expertise in this area.

In his free time, Mangesh enjoys writing short stories and is also involved in a local theatre group. He finds that these creative outlets help him to stay motivated and engaged in his work. Overall, Mangesh's career in the BPO industry has been a mix of challenges and rewarding experiences, and he remains excited about the possibilities for his future.

Case Analysis -I

Mangesh is a male in his mid-thirties who has worked in the BPO industry for over a decade. He started as a customer service representative and has worked his way up to a team leader position. His studies comprised a degree in English literature at university (3 years) and later in his career, he completed an MBA in operations. During his break from work, Mangesh discovered his interest in training and coaching and completed a course in communication skills training, which he used to establish himself as a communication skills trainer within the BPO.

From the perspective of considering reframing as a process of identity development, Mangesh is an example of someone who, early in life, had a clear vocational goal in the BPO sector, but struggled to find opportunities in his home town due to the limited job market. Pragmatically, he built a career in freelance content development and writing and was well-paid and offered considerable job security. However, after several years in this field, Mangesh experienced an identity crisis, feeling unfulfilled and disconnected from his true passion.

In 2010, Mangesh made a major mid-career transition and decided to pursue his passion for content development by starting his own digital marketing company. This move offered far less security and material rewards, but was much more personally rewarding. He was thorough in deepening and extending his skill set to give him every possibility of success in this new venture.

Furthermore, the reframing can also be seen as taking place within particular opportunity structures, especially in his move from Mumbai to the Home town. The cultural and societal differences between the two cities provided a unique context for Mangesh's career transition and influenced the way he approached his work.

Savickas (2011) emphasizes the importance of vocational identity development and the role of reframing in this process. In Mangesh's case, his mid-career transition can be seen as a form of reframing, allowing him to align his career path with his true passion and develop a stronger sense of vocational identity. Additionally, the concept of opportunity structures highlights the impact of cultural and societal factors on career development and transition.

Case Description -II

Gautam was an Indian manager who was made redundant due to a major merger between two companies. He had worked his way from a shipping trainee to executive manager in an international company with strong traditions and organizational identity. He was severely shaken by this experience and could not even make a clean break as his wife continued to work for the company. Socially, it was a kind of 'déroute' (crushing defeat) as there was a lot of prestige connected to being an executive manager and working for this specific company. Gautam had to confront himself and his values and reflect on who he is and what he wants to be. After an extended period of getting over the trauma and thinking about the future, he considered making a radical career change, but was initially not totally convinced about the reasons behind his choice.

When Gautam was re-interviewed 7 months later, he had taken a decision which is radical in terms of his working-life: he had started in the vocational program for yoga teaching and had also managed to find an apprenticeship through his extensive network. The interview revolved around his decision and what it had taken him to go from uncertainty to a radical change of career. Gautam emphasized that dialogue is one of the most important factors in taking a radical decision and that if you don't have such a friend, then buy a session with a coach. Gautam also had more formal support in thinking through his future career direction, as part of his gardening leave, he had the right to six support sessions. When Gautam was interviewed the first time, he did not have the mental resources to use the support provided by the out-placement company. Gautam had a good time being at home, but the insecurity about what the future held for him weighed heavily, so he couldn't enjoy it as he liked.

Gautam's narrative highlights the importance of counseling/coaching support. He was given a briefcase to write down his mission and life goals and was emotionally ready to start working on his career plans. In the second interview, Gautam was asked to reflect on his decision-making process and he said that he had not been ready to go into this process at the beginning, but as he got better, he had the energy to start working with the coach and go into a more strategic rational coaching process. The exercise led to a list of 28 points in which Gautam defined a 'good' working-life, such as good management, good colleagues, motivation, work–life balance and specific items such as working with people, having a well-defined working day. The coach also adapted the coaching to his needs and supported him in the process towards making this radical change happen.

Gautam talks about his encounter with semi-public support offered by his union, which has to follow certain rules about supporting job search. The interview was solely about control and had nothing to do with guiding him in his efforts to change career. Gautam pointed to three factors which had been important for him in making a successful radical career transition: time, money, and networks. He had 6 months of full salary and a wife in a high-salaried position, and his personal network was important. The metaphor that Gautam is using during the interview is the metaphor of traveling: a personal journey.

Gautam reflected on change and the barriers to taking a radical decision in terms of his working-life. He described two types of reactions from others: supportive and non-supportive. The supportive reactions were that Gautam should stick to what he had been doing in order not to waste 'his potential' and that he will not be able to fit into a lower level job. He also described social segregation, as he does not have any friends who have a vocational background and that the attitude towards him has changed since he

Case Analysis -II

Gautam's case exemplifies how career reframing processes can be viewed from three perspectives: reframing as a process of identity development, as a form of relational, emotional, practical and cognitive development, and taking place within particular opportunity structures (Brown & Bimrose, 2014). Gautam's story reflects how he underwent significant 'identity work' to effect a major shift in perspective, from perceiving himself as a trainee green-keeper to becoming a successful professional in a field he truly enjoyed. He constructed a narrative about his role transition, which provided a sense of continuity between his past and present selves (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

Gautam's decision to transition to a new career was driven by his desire for personal development and a better work-life balance. The transition-related social interactions he had with his close friend, wife, and coach allowed him to develop a changing self-narrative around renewal, which acted as a 'transition bridge' (Ashforth, 2011) across the chasm between his old and new roles and identities. Gautam's story also reflects how the change was taking place within particular opportunity structures. His prior association with his previous employer provided him with generous outplacement terms, time, and resources to consider his future. His wife's financial support and the outplacement service's support also helped him break free from expected conventions and pursue a new career path.

Finally, Gautam's career reframing process involved considerable relational, emotional, practical, and cognitive development. He did not seek an assistant role but engaged afresh in a whole new identity formation process. He took on an apprentice role where he was expected to master a new knowledge base, develop practical skills, and undergo socialization processes associated with thinking, practicing, and becoming a green-keeper. The emotional development needed to reframe his career was also apparent from his narrative - his initial inability to stop crying when thinking about life goals, the past, and the future. Gautam's journey was a significant personal one.

Conclusion

The mid-career reframing process can involve major career changes that require learning and development. Brown and Bimrose's (2019) model provides three perspectives to view the career reframing process: identity development, emotional, practical, and cognitive development, and opportunity structures. The cases of Mangesh and Gautam illustrate how individuals use these perspectives to effect major career changes.

Mangesh was facing difficulties in the administration department of his company. He was dissatisfied with the hostile work environment, and he felt like he could no longer continue working in such conditions. After much contemplation, Mangesh made an emotional decision to pursue his first love of arts as a career. He knew this decision would present financial challenges, but he was willing to take the risk. Bimrose, Barnes, and Hughes (2014) would classify Mangesh's career change as an aspirational career.

On the other hand, Gautam's case reflects a more analytical approach to career reframing. After being made redundant, he carefully reflected on his values and interests before choosing a new career that aligns with them. This approach is typical of someone with an evaluative approach to career decision-making, as described by Bimrose et al. (2014). Both Mangesh and Gautam, despite their different approaches, seek to develop new career stories aligned with their new visions and perspectives. The question then arises, do people in mid-career require assistance in reframing their careers and what learning strategies do they use to achieve their goals?

Career guidance has the potential to support learning for career reframing, with a focus on the particular needs of individuals in mid-career. According to Bimrose et al. (2014), clients in the age group of 35-45 years have found guidance useful in five ways: access to specialist information, reducing confusion, providing motivation and new insights, confirming ideas, and building confidence. Guidance has led to direct and positive change, such as changes in situation, thinking, and future plans, being pointed in the right direction, being given alternative options or ideas to consider, or affirmation of their ideas. Career counsellors using a career narrative approach can assist clients in constructing a coherent and understandable career story, where the narrative provides structure and links to relevant episodes. In the context of career reframing, the emphasis may be on developing a new story that requires some adaptation from the client's traditional story, which typically focuses on explaining how they arrived in their current job. This approach can bring out fresh perspectives and messages that can be applied to their current position.

The process of career reframing can be viewed from three perspectives: identity development, relational, emotional, practical, and cognitive development, and the specific opportunity structures within which decisions are made (Brown & Bimrose, 2014). Career counsellors can assist individuals in developing their identity, reflecting on their career story, and committing to their learning, career development, and adaptability. The next phase of support can examine the types of learning and development required across the four domains for individuals to achieve their goals.

In conclusion, the cases of Mangesh and Gautam illustrate contrasting approaches to career reframing, with one driven by emotion and the other by analysis. However, both cases share a common desire to develop new career stories aligned with their new visions and perspectives. Career guidance has the potential to support learning for career reframing, with a focus on the particular needs of individuals in mid-career. Career counsellors can use a narrative approach to assist clients in constructing coherent and understandable career stories that bring out fresh perspectives and messages. The process of career reframing can be viewed from three perspectives, and counsellors can assist individuals in developing their identity, committing to their learning and development, and exploring the specific opportunity structures within which they make their decisions.

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