**Navigating professional careers in new organisational forms**

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The notion of professional work is changing from the traditional ‘learned’ occupations in which an exclusive body of knowledge and access to practice was controlled by a privileged minority. Nowadays, many more vocational groupings enjoy professional status although, the locus of control over standards and behaviours is moving from professional bodies to organisations in which access to, and use of, knowledge is embedded in information systems. Such changes are epitomised by a new organisational form; the shared service centre (SSC) where business support functions are aggregated into business process centres so that efficiency and quality of service can be improved through task simplification, automation and the adoption of multidisciplinary process working. A consequence of the new factory-style environment is that work becomes polarised between a small number of senior professional personnel, who design and monitor work systems, and the vast majority of workers who perform low-level, transactional tasks. In the hollowed out middle, a career ‘bottleneck’ develops meaning that workers have little chance of progression and, moreover, the nature of lower level work may not equip them for senior roles potentially dulling aspirations of a long term professional career. The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of these changes for the careers of finance professionals working in the SSC.

Within the careers literature, there is a tendency to explain individual career orientations of today through theories constructed much earlier. For example Schein’s (1978) concept of career anchors aims to provide a stable framework of influence throughout an individual’s work life, yet despite changes in organisational and technological landscapes these original anchors remain unchallenged.

This research employs a mixed methods approach. This exploratory enquiry gathers data from 38 finance professionals working in SSCs through interviews over three countries and four countries. It also employs an adapted survey instrument based on Schein’s career anchor inventory (COI; 1990). This was distributed to five centres in the UK, Poland, India, Malaysia and the Philippines (n=319, response rate 63.8%) to ask ‘how do those working in professional roles in SSCs understand and navigate their careers?’ This paper has been based on the material from the authors recent PhD thesis.

The fundamental contributions of this work are as follows: 1) Theoretically - a classification which provides a novel frame of reference for understanding types of SSC and the work within them; 2) identification of pertinent skills that both guide and potentially enable careers for finance professionals in this context; these extend beyond previous suggestions of ‘soft skills’ into new ‘business skills’ for global, multidisciplinary and organisationally focused professional work; 3) and finally, a new set of six career anchors that challenge the relevance of old theory in new contexts and provide meaningful insight into the navigation of careers in new organisational forms. This work serves as a founding and original investigation into careers within finance SSCs. There are practical implications for individual career management, the role and relevance of professional accrediting bodies in new contexts, and also for organisational HR strategy and their function in supporting individual skills development for contemporary professionals in new organisational forms.