



**Investigating the protean and the boundaryless career: the aging workforce in the contemporary organization**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper systematically reviews literature which analyses the protean and boundaryless career with regard to aging. A literature search in several databases resulted in 11 relevant articles that will be discussed. The protean career can be seen as an individual who shapes his or her own career according to the own needs and values. The boundaryless career can be described as physical mobility across the borders of an organization which is driven by the needs of an employee. With regard to age and these constructs employees show less protean and boundaryless behavior as they get older. However, some research suggests that employees develop some protean or boundaryless behavior as they get older. Implications and recommendations of these findings are discussed.

**Keywords:** protean career, boundaryless career, aging employees, age and work, employer change, mobility, career orientation.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the past decades, the career of employees has changed drastically which has an influence on both employees and organizations (Hall, 1987; Arthur, 1994; Gubler, Arnold, & Coombs, 2014). Employees used to work for a lifetime for the same organization, success was derived from the level of salary and the organization enabled employees to grow according to organizations needs in terms of training and development (Hall, 2004; Levinson, 1978; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). These days employees change their employment more often, they move within and across organizations and these movements are subject to the needs and flexibility of the employee instead of the organization (Bravo, Seibert, Kraimer, Wayne, & Liden, 2015). This differs from the original outlook on careers which was common before, namely the organization is in charge and makes the choices for the employee. Apart from flexibility there are other factors which determine career success.

Besides being flexible, employees also have to be proactive in shaping their own careers and success is not solely based on the level of salary (Mirvis & Hall, 1994; Bravo et al., 2015). In addition to the change in the careers of employees, the workforce in Europe and North-America is changing as well due to a combination of a shrinking workforce in general, a changing tenure and a relative increase of the average age in the workforce (Van Veldhoven & Doorenbosch, 2008; Arthur, 1994). This aging workforce in combination with a changing career perspective and a changing tenure, is requesting more flexibility and proactivity from employees. It requires from employees to behave proactively in order to stay employable (Bravo, et al., 2015; Van Veldhoven & Doorenbosch, 2008). Furthermore, this flexibility shows across the organizations borders, employees seem to have a shorter tenure in an organization compared to some decades ago, namely, four years on average (BLS, 2014). However, there is a difference between older employees and younger employees. Older employees between 55 years and 65 years seem to be employed longer – median of ten years – in the same organization than younger employees between 25 to 35 years – median of three years – in the same organization (BLS,2014; Arthur, 1994). These changes in employment and current alterations in the workforce worldwide seem interesting to examine further in combination to the contemporary career perspectives.

The aim of this review is to show an overview on the current knowledge about the aging workforce in combination with the protean and boundaryless career. Therefore, this paper strives

to increase clarity regarding the relationship between the protean, boundaryless career and aging. In the past decades much research is conducted regarding the protean career and the boundaryless career. However, the distinction between and the definition of these constructs have become faded over the decades (Arthur, 2014; Mirvis & Hall, 1994). This paper has both scientific and practical relevance, the theoretical relevance of this study is to give a clear overview of the protean and boundaryless career in order to contribute to the field. As, a growing body of knowledge about career perspectives and aging is present however, the findings are not consistent because some research is contradictory (Warr & Fay, 2001; Van Veldhoven & Dorenbosch, 2008). Firstly, practical relevance for this review would be to investigate the assumption that it may seem that older employees have a disadvantage compared to younger employees since careers have shifted to a more flexible form and a general prejudice is that older employees seem less energetic and motivated about their job than younger employees (Warr & Fay, 2001). However, the contrary is proved as well by Van Veldhoven and Doorenbosch (2008) they found that older employees not necessarily have a disadvantage compared to younger employees. The prejudice that older employees have a disadvantage regarding flexibility, motivation, etc. may lead to unwanted age discrimination, therefore in practical terms, organizations can act to prevent this assumption by giving an insight in aging and different career perspectives. A second theoretical relevance of this study is to get an insight in the protean and boundaryless career with regard to employees in different age groups. In practical terms this will help organizations to support their employees even more because they can arrange effective custom made programs to keep their employees employable.

In summary, this research will give a systematic overview of current literature about the protean and boundaryless career with regard to ageing in the workforce and some implications regarding the results will be given. The results of this literature study will be used to answer the following research question:

*To what extent is age related to differences in the protean career and the boundaryless career?*

## **METHOD**

In order to obtain an answer on the previously mentioned research question, a literature search was conducted. The articles relevant for this review were gathered by the search of relevant articles through computer searches. Several databases were used, such as Science

Direct, Worldcat, Web of Science, Business Source Elite and Google Scholar. Search terms such as “boundaryless career”, “protean career”, “age”, were used in order to retrieve relevant information. Furthermore, the terms “AND” and “OR” were added in the search to combine the previously mentioned terms with the intention to get more relevant hits which contained all of the search terms in the title. Several criteria had to be met in order to select relevant information.

Firstly, the articles had to be peer reviewed in order to be included in this review, these criteria have to be met because peer reviewed articles are more likely to be plausible which will increase the reliability of this review. Secondly, the articles had to be published after 1994 to be included in this review in order to ensure that the information is accurate. In addition to this criteria, the first time terms such as boundaryless career were used was in 1994 by researcher Arthur, who came up with this term. Therefore, it was more difficult for older articles to determine whether the correct form of the boundaryless career perspective was used. The first time the protean career was mentioned, was in 1974 by Hall, his initial description of the protean career will be stated in the results section. In order to keep the results section as contemporary as possible, only studies after 1994 will be used considering the protean career just as is the case with the boundaryless career. A third selection criteria is that the articles should include the search terms in the title, if the title looked promising, the abstract was read. The search terms had to be in the title in order to reduce the amount of hits and to increase the probability that a certain article is relevant for this study.

Fourthly, after reading a promising title and abstract, the reference list was checked for more relevant literature, this procedure is called snowballing (Van Tulder, 2007). Lastly, all selected studies had to be published in a journal with an impact factor of 2,5 or higher. There is one exception to this criteria, the article of Baruch, Grimland, & Vigoda-Gadot (2014) was published in a journal with an impact factor of 1,2. This impact factor is considered reliable enough and the findings of this article were able to show a nice alternative perspective in this review, which will be discussed later.

This procedure resulted in eleven relevant articles that were used for this study and can be viewed in Appendix 1.

## **RESULTS**

After applying the criteria mentioned in the method section, eleven studies were found regarding the protean career and the boundaryless career compared to age. A short introduction about the two different constructs will be given first, whereafter the results of the studies regarding the protean career and the influence of age will be discussed. Lastly a discussion of the results of the studies regarding the boundaryless career and the influence of age will be presented.

### **Protean career**

The first time the protean career was mentioned was in 1976 by Hall and was defined as:

The protean career is a process which the person, not the organization, is managing.

It consists of all of the person's varied experiences in education, training, work in several organizations, changes in occupational field, etc. The protean career is *not* what happens to the person in any one organization. The protean person's own personal career choices and search for self-fulfillment are the unifying or integrative elements in his or her life.

The criterion of success is internal (psychological success), not external. (p. 201).

This citation was summarized by Hall (1976) as: "In short, the protean career is shaped more by the individual than by the organization and may be redirected from time to time to meet the needs of the person" (Hall, 1976, p. 201).

The term protean is named after the Greek god Proteus who was able to change its form at his own will (Hall, 1976), which is an accurate description of this type of career because an employee with a protean career in fact does the same. This employee has the ability to change his career in order to match his interests, values and needs. The protean career can be seen as an advancement of the former traditional organizational career, where an employee was lifelong employed in the same organization (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). An employee with an organizational career follows the needs of the organization instead of his own needs. The definition of the protean career of Hall and Mirvis in 1995 is still in line with the former definition of the protean career of Hall in 1974. Mirvis and Hall (1995) differ in description of the protean career from Hall in 1974 in terms of the fact that the choices are explicitly made by the employee, mostly in search for self-fulfillment and consists of certain elements which fits in the life of the employee (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). It could be concluded that the protean career has a better fit with the contemporary society, in which most organizations operate these days, than with the

organizational career (Hall, 2004). The contemporary society demands flexibility, adaptability and individuality from individuals and organizations. Furthermore, the protean career is not only determined by the employee (Hall, 1974) but are also determined by the need for self-fulfillment of the employee (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). Moreover, these authors argue that the protean career consists of several meta-skills.

Due to the contemporary work environment which is developing quickly, two key competences are required in order to adapt to this environment (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). These competences can be seen as meta-skills, which teaches an individual how to learn. The first meta-skill is *identity development* which entails growth in complexity, self-reflection and self-learning. The second meta-skill is called *adaptability*, which entails being flexibility toward changes in one's career or work environment (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). The development of these two meta-skills happens by establishing routine in a job which happens over the years of employment and by continuous learning (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). Furthermore, as stated before, the protean career is dependent on self-direction in the quest for psychological success which can be seen as career success. This success is internal and entails a feeling of pride and personal accomplishment that originates from knowing that one has done the best one could (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). These previously mentioned meta-skills can be combined with self-directedness in terms of, self-directedness drives an individual to develop his or her meta-skills in order to experience career-success. Therefore, it could be argued that a lack of self-direction implies a lack of development of identity and adaptability which makes an employee rely on his or her skills for the entire career span and this can result in an employee becoming less employable (Mirvis & Hall, 1995).

To conclude, the description of the protean career is still the same, as stated by Hall in 1974, however, what differs is the notion that protean career development happens by two meta-skills which can be enhanced by development of routines and by continuous learning by the employee (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). This differs from Hall (1976) who only mentions career development by personal choices and a search for self-fulfillment.

Briscoe, Hall and Frautschy DeMuth (2006) specify the protean career even further than Mirvis and Hall (1995). They do acknowledge that the protean career is driven by the employee which is in line by Hall (1974) and Hall and Mirvis (1995). Although there is a similarity, Briscoe et al. (2006) differ from these previously mentioned authors by stating that the protean

career consists of two attitudes. An employee who has a protean career has both a *value-driven* attitude as well as a *self-directed* attitude concerning career management. Which means that these employees, in terms of being value-driven, guide their career by their own values instead of the organizations values and make their own decisions regarding their career instead of the organization (Briscoe et al, 2006). Value-driven attitudes can be seen as an ‘internal compass’ which an individual uses make career choices (Segers, Inceoglu, Vloeberghs, Bartram, & Henderickx, 2008). In terms of the self-directed attitude, it means that an employee is able to manage his or her career by its own and is adaptive toward performance and learning (Briscoe et al., 2006). It could therefore be concluded that the value-driven attitude differs from the self-directed attitude in terms of value-driven attitudes can be seen as guidance for the employee and self-directed attitudes can be seen as an employee who actually takes matters in his own hand and seeks what is needed to suffice internal values (Briscoe, et al., 2006; Segers et al., 2008). An employee who lacks these attitudes can be seen as rigid and is not able to adapt to a changing environment which endangers employability (Briscoe, et al., 2006). This description of the protean career is quite similar to the description of Hall (1976), Hall and Mirvis (1995) and later of Hall (2004). The difference with the former description of Hall et al. (1995, 2004) can be found in measuring career attitudes in two dimensions, namely a value-driven attitude and a self-directed attitude (Briscoe et al, 2006).

Gubler, et al. (2014) build further on the framework concerning the value-driven attitudes and the self-driven attitude of Briscoe et al. (2006), they acknowledged the value-driven and the self-directed attitudes of the protean career but see more dimensions within the value-driven and the self-directed attitudes of the protean career. The value-driven attitude is divided into on the one hand clarity about the employee’s needs, motivation, interests, ability and values and on the other hand being aware of one’s personal values that guide the degree of career success. Within the second attitude, self-directedness Gubler et al. (2014) make a distinction between, firstly, being competent, motivated to learn and able to adapt to a changing environment. Secondly, one has a feeling of independence and a feeling of being in charge of the own career.

Lastly, Professional vitality is included in this review because it has some influence on the protean career. Professional vitality can be seen as a combination between high satisfaction, both in one’s job and in life, productivity and engagement that empowers employees to strive for maximum career success (Baruch, Grimland and Vigoda-Gadot, 2014). These authors argue that

having a protean career will make employees professionally vital and therefore experience career success. Since professional vitality is a supportive instrument for career success because a professionally vital employee will be more protean thus will feel safe to take more risks by undertaking challenging tasks. If these employees succeed their achievement, they will be rewarded by the organization which leads to psychological career success (Baruch et al., 2014).

To summarize, the protean career is a type of career in which the employee is expected to form his or her own career according to the own needs instead of the organization's needs (Hall, 1976; Hall & Mirvis, 1995). The design of the protean career is therefore on the one hand self-directed and on the other hand value-driven by the individual (Briscoe et al., 2006). The value-driven attitudes, on the one hand, can be seen as clarity about the employee's needs, motivations, needs, values and being aware of these values that guide in striving for career success (Gubler et al., 2014). On the other hand, self-directed attitudes can be seen as feelings of competence, motivation to learn, adapt to the environment, feeling independent as an employee and being in charge of the own career. Furthermore, it is argued that the protean career influences the professional vitality of an employee which determines career success. An employee with a protean career has consequently the energy to strive for career success (Baruch et al., 2014).

### **Boundaryless career**

Arthur (1994) was the first to describe the boundaryless career in a way which entails sequences of job opportunities that go beyond the organization where the employee is currently employed. He describes six characteristics that determine the boundaryless career:

- (1) The career should move across the boundaries of the organization;
- (2) the career draws validation and marketability from outside the organization;
- (3) the networks of the employee exist outside the organization as well as inside the organization;
- (4) reporting and promotion is no longer hierarchical;
- (5) an employee can reject career opportunities for personal or family reasons; and
- (6) employees perceive their future as boundaryless regardless of structural constraints.

All of these characteristics have something in common, namely their independence from traditional organizational career principles (Arthur, 1994) To conclude, the boundaryless career differs from the organizational career in terms of more mobility, flexibility and can be seen as a

different viewing point, just as the protean career, instead of the organizational career (Arthur, 1994, Mirvis & Hall, 1994).

A misconception about the organizational career that people used to have started in the '50's of the last century. Many people started to work with the idea of a lifetime career and these people thought that if they stayed long enough in the same organization, they would eventually master their job and move hierarchically upward in the organization. However, in the next 30 years these people realized that changes in the career were a necessity in order gain psychological success (Mirvis & Hall, 1994). Psychological success can, according to the same authors as stated before, be described as achieving goals which are meaningful for an individual.

Mirvis and Hall (1994) see the boundaryless career as cyclical career development in which career success has become more and more the responsibility of the individual employee instead of the organization. It could be argued that a reason for the shift in responsibility from the organization to the employee is the increasing unique demands of an employee, such as work-home conflicts, elderly care and child care (Mirvis & Hall, 1994). The notion of the boundaryless career did not fit the conservative conception of hard work and persistence in order to climb upwards in an organization and experience career success, in the time of writing (Mirvis & Hall, 1994). The view on the boundaryless career of these authors has quite some overlap with the protean career in terms of the employee who is responsible for his own career. The difference with the original protean career is the notion that an individual is able to shift between organizations which is not stated before.

Briscoe et al. (2006) see the boundaryless career as varying attitudes of actors, in this case employees, hold towards initiating and following several work-related relationships across the boundaries of an organization. These attitudes towards the boundaryless career are for example having positive feelings towards organizational mobility. This differs from Arthur (1995) in terms of looking further than movements of employees or as cyclical development of careers (Mirvis & Hall, 1994). Briscoe et al. (2006) reckon that the boundaryless career happens not only at a physical level but also on a psychological level of the employee. Therefore, the boundaryless career does not imply that an employee actually moves to another company, the employee is merely open towards creating and maintaining relationships that go beyond the organization's boundaries. It could be concluded that these authors see the boundaryless career in the first place as a psychological state. In the second place, they see this type of career as

physical as well, which entails physical career mobility, which is recognized too by Arthur (1994). The boundaryless career can be seen as an employee who is open towards a career that entails working for several different employers over a career span. Briscoe, et al. (2006) state that protean and boundaryless careers have some overlap, they can be seen as related but independent. For instance, a person can show protean attitudes and make independent choices but does not prefer to look outside the organization where he or she is currently employed.

As previously mentioned the boundaryless career can be seen as career development which can move across the boundaries of the organization where the employee is currently employed (Arthur, 1994). In addition, these authors state that this career happens within the employee on a psychological level, which therefore has an overlap with the protean career (Biscoe et al., 2006).

The boundaryless career differs from the protean career in terms of that the protean career exists on the internal level of an individual, not on an external level (Gubler et al., 2014). The protean career measures self-directed and value-driven attitudes of an individual whereas the boundaryless career involves physical mobility (Briscoe et al., 2006). Differences between the boundaryless and the protean career consists of being able to follow ones needs regarding the career. In both cases the employee has to be flexible and adaptable in or outside the organization. Interestingly, the boundaryless career posits that promotion and reporting is not necessarily hierarchical, this concept is not covered in the protean career.

To conclude, the boundaryless career can be seen as a career which moves inside and across the perimeters of the organization, does not follow hierarchical patterns and, similar to the protean career, is driven by the needs of the employee instead of driven by the needs of the organization (Arthur, 1994; Briscoe et al., 2006). Furthermore, the boundaryless career can be seen as cyclical development in order to attain career success (Mirvis & Hall, 1994). This cyclical development does not necessarily imply physical mobility, psychological mobility, such as having different networks in and outside the organization counts as well (Briscoe et al., 2006). The similarity between the boundaryless career and the protean career is that in both cases the employee is in the first place responsible for the choices he or she makes (Mirvis & Hall, 1994).

## **The relationship between age and the protean career**

With regard to the relationship between age and the protean career there has been conducted several studies which will be elaborated in this section. Age in this part of the discussion of the results can be seen as the physical age of an employee who engages in a protean career. The only exception is the article of Hall and Mirvis (1995), they mention career cycles. However, they are not clear about the duration of a career cycle or which age goes with which career cycle. As mentioned before, the career perspective has shifted from an organizational career towards a protean career or a boundaryless career which will be elaborated later in the next section in contrast to age (Hall, 1974; Arthur, 1994; Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Sullivan & Arthur 2006; Briscoe et al., 2006; Gubler et al., 2014)

In a review Hall and Mirvis (1995) analyze different findings regarding the protean career with and aging employees, career cycles and the set of mutual expectations between employer and employee which will be named the 'career contract'. According to Hall and Mirvis (1995) the 'new career' contract, which is seen by them as the protean career, can be challenging for older workers because these workers have developed their knowledge, skills and identity in line with the demands of the organization. Which means that, for instance, the skills of these employee can be very specific of which they thought would serve them for the rest of their career in the organization. This narrow development of skills and identity is not in line with the new career concept and may cause problems regarding adaptability and the development of skills that are more self-directed. According to Hall and Mirvis (1995) the older employee can improve the lack of self-directedness by continuous learning which will break routine behavior and consequently will empower an employee to move to a new career cycle. As stated before in the section about the protean career in general, routines are needed to fulfill a career cycle and move forward. However, breaking routine behavior can according to the new career contract development in mover through different cycles. Development consists of two types of meta-skills. The first is *identity growth* which entails more complexity, more self-reflection and more self-learning in contrast to the organizational career contract. The second meta-skill is increased *adaptability*, and it is assumed that continuous training will improve adaptability of older workers. It is argued by Hall & Mirvis (1995) that as people get older, they acquire more routines and therefore become more rigid which decreases the previously mentioned meta-skills, if these employees do not take action.

The new career contract offers more flexibility in career choices for the employee and therefore more freedom in the choices that can be made by an employee which also implies that the meta-skills *identity growth* and *adaptability* needs to be developed. This increased flexibility can be challenging for older employees because they have established more routines (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). Fortunately, there are some advantages for older employees compared to younger employees such as, a bigger network of relationship on which they can rely when it comes to teamwork and being adaptable toward environmental change (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). This environmental change is part of the protean career as well in terms of the changing needs of an employee in terms of altering work-family dynamics and relates to a self-directed attitude in the protean career (Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Gubler et al., 2014). To conclude, according to Hall and Mirvis (1995) employees in their mid-career can be successful and get a good fit with the environment if they keep learning about themselves which will change behavior and attitudes. This is related to the protean and aging in terms of older employees who seem like they are not very protean, because they developed their career in the first place according to the needs of the organization instead of their own needs. However, by continuous learning, routines can vanish which will give older employees an advantage over younger employees in terms of adaptability and the employee taking charge of the own career.

Twenty years later, Hall (2004) proposes the same findings as in 1995 (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). In a review Hall (2004) covers the development of the protean career over the years which has evolved because of broad general organizational changes such as restructuring, decentralization and globalization. Hall (2004) proposes that the protean careerist is someone who is willing to learn continuously, open to new possibilities and sees his career as several learning cycles. Additionally, Hall (2004) argues that personal alignment and protean orientation seems to be lower for older workers than for younger workers. Furthermore, he found that established routines are difficult to diminish which is another disadvantage of the older employee compared to younger employees. It could be concluded that with regard to the protean career, older employees seem to have a disadvantage in terms of being proactive about their own career and it is challenging to diminish established routines (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). Having routines is problematic when moving through different career cycles which can also be seen as a part of the protean career (Hall, 2004). This author (2004) argues that when employees break their routines, they are more likely to explore new possibilities which will let them move through different

career cycles, above all this exploring will boost the confidence of employee and it will give them more autonomy which is beneficial in career success.

In terms of career success Baruch et al. (2014) argue that the degree of career success is determined by professional vitality which is partly caused by having a protean career. In a cross sectional study with 454 participants Baruch et al. (2014) showed that the relationship between professional vitality and age is an inverted U-shape which maximizes at the age of 57. These authors show that employees reasonably close to requirement, 57 years old, are at their optimal level of professional vitality which comes together with protean career attitudes. This is inconsistent with earlier mentioned literature because the other literature states that older employees have some disadvantages regarding the protean career (Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Hall, 2004; Segers et al., 2008).

The last research regarding aging and the protean career mentioned in this study is by Segers, Inceoglu, Vloeberghs, Bartram and Henderickx (2008), these findings are in line with earlier mentioned studies in terms of value-driven and self-directed attitudes. These authors examined which work motives are related to the protean and the boundaryless career, the later will be discussed in the next section. These authors studied the protean career and the boundaryless career with a cross-sectional design across nine European countries, containing 13 000 participants (N=13 000). Segers et al. (2008) found that as people get older, people get less motivated to manage their own career, which is an important part of being a protean careerist (Hall, 2004). Compared to the definition of Hall and Mirvis (1995) managing one's own career is the self-directed component of the protean career. This effect can be explained by a perceived lower value/effort balance and the emergence of routine. A second finding from Segers, et al. (2008) is that people become more motivated to follow their own values as they get older. This is in line with the value-driven component of the original protean career (Hall & Mirvis, 1994). Lastly Segers et al. (2008) confirmed the assumption that people's motivation seems to change from reactive to a rigid career attitude as people age.

To summarize, older employees do have a disadvantage in being less protean in contrast to younger employees with regard to self-directedness because of emerging routine behavior. However, older employees have an advantage as well regarding following their own values (Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Segers, et al., 2008). This is partly in line with previous findings of Hall & Mirvis (1995) and Hall (2004) in terms of difficulties to diminish routines. The findings of

Segers et al. (2008) differ from other literature in terms of older employees who definitely can be protean because they follow their own values. Authors such as Hall (2004) and Briscoe et al. (2006) argue that in general older employees have a disadvantage compared to younger employees in terms of having a protean career.

To conclude the relationship between the protean career and age there are several assumptions with regard to older employees. The protean career can be divided into two attitudes namely, a value-driven attitude and a self-directed attitude (Briscoe et al., 2006). With regard to a value-driven attitude, employees are more motivated to follow their own values as they age (Segers et al., 2008). Regarding self-directedness older employees have some disadvantages such as for instance being less adaptable to a changing environment because of established routines (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). However, the majority of older employees have quite a large network compared to younger employees which can help them with teamwork and being adaptable (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). In sight of the protean career, and older employee can be less self-directed because of a lack of the feeling of being in charge of one's own career (Segers et al., 2008). However, this can be improved by continuous learning which will break established routines and can make employees more adaptable, which is one of the meta-skills of the protean career (Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Hall, 2004). Furthermore, continuous learning will make an employee more independent and it will make him feel more competent (Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Briscoe et al., 2006; Gubler et al., 2014).

### **The relationship between age and the boundaryless career**

Regarding the relationship between age and the boundaryless career, several researchers conducted studies and these findings will be elaborated further in this section.

Mirvis and Hall (1994) state that the boundaryless career is related to age in two different ways. Namely, chronological age which is the actual age of an employee and the career age which entails the time an employee works for the same organization and in the same job. This career age is related to the career cycles in a way that if an employee reaches a plateau in its career, he or she will move towards another career and the career age will start over again. Interestingly to see is that the initial performance level of an employee who recently changed career, does not drop to the lowest level of the cycle the employee had before. These different career cycles can be seen as learning stages (Mirvis & Hall, 1994). Moving through the different

career cycles will help employees to acquire new skills which will make an employee adaptable to his job, the organization and the boundarylessness of an organization (Mirvis & Hall, 1994).

In a study of Cheramie, Sturman and Walsh (2007) job changing executives were studied right before their switch and after their switch of employer in a period between 1992 and 1997. These authors used a database which contained information about the top five executives in over 1700 organizations and contains approximately 9000 individuals. The information of a group of non-movers was used as well as a control group in order to compare the findings with the group of movers (Cheramie et al., 2007). This study relates to the boundaryless career because physical and psychological mobility was observed. This study examined what factors can cause an executive to change his or her job and one of these factors who influenced job change was age. Results suggested that age has a negative effect on employer movements (Cheramie et al., 2007). These results imply that an older employee is less boundaryless than a younger employee because older employees show less mobility. This study differs from the previously mentioned study of Mirvis and Hall (1994) which suggested that employees will change their job after they completed a career cycle which implies continuous learning and a boundaryless career. Cheramie et al. (2007) show in their research that job changing occurs less as an employee gets older and therefore, older employees become less boundaryless as they get older.

As mentioned before the study of Segers et al. (2008), (N=13 000) not only examined the effects of age on a protean career, the effects of age on a boundaryless career were examined as well. With regard to the boundaryless career and physical mobility, these researchers found that younger people relate better to a changing employment than older people and therefore older people are less motivated to change their physical employment. Moreover, they also find that as employees get older, employees get more motivated to work autonomously, which causes that that older employees are also more motivated to create work relations which cross the organizational boundaries. Segers et al. (2008) tested whether psychological mobility was positively related to age but this finding was not supported. In comparison to the research of Cheramie et al. (2007) the results of Segers et al. (2008) have some overlap in terms of the fact that older employees become less boundaryless over the years.

To conclude the relationship between the boundaryless career and age there are several assumptions with regard to older employees. The overall assumption is that older employees are less boundaryless than younger employees (Cheramie et al., 2007; Segers et al., 2008). This

could be explained by a lack of motivation to autonomously change a job (Segers et al., 2008; Cheramie). However, in terms of having a large network in and outside the organization, which is also part of the boundaryless career, older employees have an advantage according to Segers et al. (2008).

## **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

In the past decades the career of employees has shifted from an organization perspective towards a protean and boundaryless career perspective (Hall, 1995; Arthur, 1995; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006; Gubler et al. 2014). Furthermore, employees change their employment more often by moving within and across organizations and these movements are mostly driven by their own interests or needs (Bravo et al., 2015). Certain assumptions regarding the difference between younger and older employees exist in terms of older employees who might be less able or willing to show protean and boundaryless behavior (BLS, 2014; Arthur, 1994; Warr & Fay, 2001). Additionally, older employees seem to be less able to adapt to a changing organization (Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Hall, 2004; Segers et al., 2008). This study aimed to get an overview on current knowledge regarding the boundaryless, protean career and aging, as previously mentioned this paper examined the relationship between age and both the boundaryless and protean career by reviewing several studies. Firstly, an overview of the research methodology was given, after that the different concepts, protean and boundaryless career, were discussed. Lastly these concepts were examined in the light of the difference between younger and older employees by discussing the available studies in order to answer the research question.

In the light of the research question it could be concluded that age does have an influence on the protean and boundaryless careers of employees. However, the relationship cannot be straightforwardly assumed negative. Older employees seem to have some disadvantages, although there are some advantages which can help these employees being flexible and able to have a protean or boundaryless career.

As stated before the protean career differs from the boundaryless career in terms of the protean career is more on an internal level, meaning protean behavior happens on the inside of an individual, on a psychological level (Mirvis & Hall, 1994). The boundaryless career on the other hand can be seen as physical mobility of an individual during his or her working-age period and focuses more on the environment of an individual as well (Arthur, 2014). Therefore, the

boundaryless career can be seen as cyclical career development whereas the protean career is not (Mirvis & Hall, 1994). According to these authors the protean career is not cyclical because it is more flexible than cycles. This type of career can unravel non-cyclical over time and space, which means that it is possible that for example an individual chooses to take some time off of work to care for family and still attain psychological success, this too is part of the protean career. Whereas the boundaryless career only considers cycles within and between different occupations (Mirvis & Hall, 1994). What these two careers do have in common is that in the end both approaches strive for psychological success (Mirvis & Hall, 1994)

The overall results regarding the protean career and age show that most cases older employees seem to have a disadvantage regarding having a protean career because of established routines which makes older employees rigid and less able to adapt to a changing organization (Hall & Mirvis, 1994; Hall, 2004; Segers et al., 2008). This disadvantage can be diminished by continuous learning which can give an employee more confidence which can make an employee feel competent and independent which can improve having a protean career (Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Briscoe et al., 2006; Segers et al., 2014). Older employees do have some advantages compared to younger employees, such as a bigger network on which older employees can rely (Hall & Mirvis, 1995). This is an advantage because a large network can favor adaptability towards a changing work environment. Furthermore, older employees are more motivated to follow their own values which increases the feeling of having a protean career (Segers et al., 2008). With regard to the boundaryless career and aging older employees have, just as with the protean career, some disadvantages as well (Cheramié et al., 2007; Segers et al., 2008; Arthur, 1995). Because of reduced motivation to autonomously change one's job, which makes older employees more likely to stay where they are regarding their career (Segers et al., 2008). However, aging employees do have an advantage in terms of their large network. It is argued that as employees get older, their network gets larger on which older employees can rely in terms of being adaptable and flexible to their environment and organization (Segers et al., 2008).

A notable inconsistency of these previously mentioned findings can be found in the study of Baruch et al., (2014). These authors contradict the overall findings that generally employees will show less protean behavior as they get older. They discovered that at the age 57 employees are at their optimal level regarding professional vitality. This indicates that older employees who come closer to their retirement age are still very valuable for an organization. Another

inconsistency can be found in the study of Mirvis and Hall (1994), they state that the boundaryless career is cyclical and employees will move through these different stages over the years. Moving through these career cycles lets employees acquire new skills and increases adaptability and therefore enhances boundaryless behavior. Therefore, it can be assumed that older employees will acquire a rich set of abilities over their years of employment which makes them very adaptable in and outside the organization. It seems like older employees do not have a disadvantage regarding the boundaryless career in comparison with younger employees (Mirvis & Hall, 1994).

### **Limitations and recommendations for future research**

Despite the interesting findings which were stated in this review there are some limitations which have to be taken in mind. Firstly, most conducted studies are not very clear about aging employees, in most research age is only used as a control variable and there are not many specific studies which investigate the relationship between boundaryless or protean career and age. The studies which were discussed in this review, however, did mention differences between younger and older employees but were not very specific regarding the actual age of an 'older' employee. It should be pointed out that Baruch et al. (2014) are the only exception on this limitation. They stated very clearly that there is an optimum age. Therefore, more research should be conducted in order to make a clearer distinction between older and younger employees.

Secondly, what is striking when conducting this review is that most research builds upon the same authors such as Hall for the protean career and Arthur for the boundaryless career. This can be a limitation because a lot of studies are very much in line with earlier literature because much of the literature is written by the same authors, who are more likely to stand behind their earlier work, this makes the field quite narrow. Research conducted by different researchers such as Segers et al. (2008) shed some different lighting on the subject which is refreshing and should be done more in order to broaden the field. Another consequence of the fact that much literature is written by the same authors is when authors do cross over, for example Hall & Mirvis (1995) who investigate the boundaryless career as well, are not very well able to make a clear distinction between protean and boundaryless, which does not bring much clarity to the field.

A third limitation is the lack of meta-analyses in the field of the boundaryless and protean career with regard to age. A meta-analysis is able to show statistically combine a large number of case studies and make the subject more transparent (Swanborn, 2010). However, there are quite some reviews written in this field, additional meta-analyses would be contributing to the field because, of a growing body of knowledge. This would increase the reliability of the boundaryless and protean career because different constructs on which these career types build can be tested. Plus, more insight can be given regarding underlying constructs of the protean and boundaryless career. A recommendation for future research therefore would be to conduct a meta-analysis which measures different constructs within these two career types in order to increase the reliability.

Fourthly, there should be conducted more longitudinal studies regarding the argued subject in this review. Only one of the discussed studies used a longitudinal research design which makes it difficult to determine how these careers develop over time. It would be interesting to see how values and decision making of employees regarding their career change over time. Especially if boundaryless and protean behavior was measured over time. Additionally, as stated before it is difficult to interpret when an older employee is actually an older employee. Future research which uses a longitudinal design could make the development of protean and boundaryless career more insightful.

Lastly, there are some methodological limitations in this study, for instance the rather limited number of discussed studies which makes it difficult to disclose if there is not more evidence that contradicts the assumption that older employees have a disadvantage compared to younger employees. Furthermore, most studies discussed in this review focus on the western society, with the exception of the article of Briscoe et al. (2006) who conduct their research on private eastern universities and on universities on the Middle-East. Future research should conduct more research in other countries to increase generalizability of assumptions regarding the protean and boundaryless career.

### **Theoretical and practical implications**

This review contributed to the current literature by analyzing the field of the protean and the boundaryless career and the relationship with aging which contributes to the body of knowledge regarding careers and employability. As stated before there are some contradictory

results regarding these career perspectives and age which are outlined. Such as was discussed before, Baruch et al. (2006) state that employees at the age of 57 are still very valuable for the organizations in terms of professional vitality. Furthermore, as discussed before by Mirvis and Hall (1994), they argue that the boundaryless career can be seen as cyclical movements through which individuals seem to move over the years, but it is not stated that age has an influence on this type of career. Another theoretical implication of this review is the clear distinction it makes between the several career types and aging. This makes a clear starting point to build further on the existing knowledge regarding the protean and boundaryless career.

Therefore, it can be argued that it is very well possible to show protean or boundaryless behavior as an older employee which adds to the field as a practical implication. Based on the findings of this review, organizations can benefit from this and use it to their advantage. It should be pointed out that the protean and boundaryless career are not only beneficial to the employee itself in terms of employability, but organizations can benefit as well in terms of increased performance because of this behavior. Organizations can benefit from this review by learning that older employees are still very valuable regarding their age and are able to keep on growing which will make them an asset to every organization. Employees who have a Protean and boundaryless are able to continuously develop according to the changes of their environment in which the organization has a part as well. This makes them valuable because these older employees are able to use their knowledge according to the demands of their environment and most important of all they keep developing themselves which will make them fit very well in an organization. As stated before older employees differ from younger employees in terms of having a protean career, younger employees are generally more flexible, however older employees can be flexible to because in most cases these employees do not have a lot of big responsibilities such as raising young children and paying a mortgage which can make older employees flexible (Mirvis & Hall, 1994). As stated by both interviewee 1 and 2 (appendix 2), older employees have a tendency to say “these developments are not for me”, meaning that these employees think the return of a training is not high enough considering the time they will be active as an employee. As a supervisor interviewee 1 tries to break this assumption by pointing out that an older employee has a very large network and a lot of knowledge which can be optimized even further by the right training. Therefore, organizations have a role in supporting

older employees by pointing out that they are very valuable and by developing themselves they stay valuable.

Moreover, some organizations benefit from this knowledge already, in terms of the boundaryless career it was argued by Arthur (1994) that having a large network is part of this type of career. Furthermore, Hall and Mirvis (1995) added to this notion that as employees get older, their network grows. As stated by interviewee 1 the network of older employees is used by the organization to get a better view of a job applicant or to find out if a valuable professional is interested to come work in the organization of interviewee. The practical implication of the presented literature is that organizations should use the network of an older employee because the organization can benefit from it by gaining extra information which is almost impossible to acquire through a sole job interview.

Another practical implication from which organizations can benefit is stated by interviewee 2 (Appendix 2). He argues that as he got older he was better able to use his values in order to maximize the outcomes of a project. This is in line with the findings of Hall and Mirvis (1995) and Segers, et al. (2008). Therefore, organizations, especially project-based, can benefit from this notion by assigning an older employee to overview the project and steer the team in the right direction. To conclude, not only employees can benefit from the boundaryless and protean career, organizations can have a benefit too and should be aware of its positive influences.

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## APPENDIX 1

| <i>Author(s) and year of publishing</i>  | <i>Key Concepts</i>   | <i>Main Findings</i>   | <i>Sample Characteristics</i>                  |
|--|---|--|--|
| Arthur (1994)                            | -   | Overview regarding the boundaryless career.  | Literature Review                              |
| Briscoe, Hall, & Frautschy DeMuth (2006) | Protean Career, boundaryless career   | Scales to measure protean and boundaryless career attitudes are constructed, the protean career is divided into a value-driven component and a self-directed component. Scales are proved to be reliable and valid by three studies.   | 3 cross sectional studies, N=297, N=574, N=228 |
| Hall & Mirvis (1995)                     | -   | Continuous learning can work as a means of a lifelong development of older workers.  | Literature Review                              |
| Hall (2004)                              | -   | Personal alignment and protean orientation seem higher for younger workers than for their older colleagues.  | Literature Review                              |
| Gubler, Arnold & Coombs (2014)           | Protean career, new careers, literature review, career orientation, measurement | The Protean career is divided into four components: clarity about the employee's needs, being aware of personal values that guide the degree of career success, able to adapt to a changing environment and having a feeling of independence. The first two components are extracted from Briscoe's et al. (2006) value-driven component and the last two components are extracted from Briscoe's et al. (2006) self-directed component. | Literature Review                              |

|  |   |   |                                  |
|--|---|---|----------------------------------|
| Sullivan & Arthur (2006)                                   | Career, Boundaryless, Protean, Women, Transitions, Mobility, Gender   | Overview regarding the boundaryless career and a presentation of a boundaryless career model.   | Literature Review                |
| Segers, Inceoglu, Vloeberghs, Bartram, & Henderickx (2008) | Protean, Boundaryless, Motivation, Career, Age, Gender, Culture, Attitude   | Individuals become less motivated to actively manage their own careers as they become older, people become more motivated to follow their own values as they get older, within the protean career model employees become more rigid over the years, as for boundaryless younger people adapt better to fluid and changing employment relations than older people. | Cross sectional study<br>N=13000 |
| Cheramie, Sturman, & Walsh (2007)                          | Boundaryless career, Executive career management, Job movements, Physical mobility; Employer changes, Relative standing | Factors such as age and compensation are related to the likelihood of job movements and declining organizational health.  | Longitudinal study,<br>N=91      |
| Mirvis & Hall (1994)                                       | -   | Description of the boundaryless career and overview of how aging employees deal with several career cycles. In every cycle, the employee reaches a performance plateau. It is expected that in the future, as technology develops these cycles will get shorter.  | Literature Review                |
| Baruch, Grimland, & Vigoda-Gadot (2014)                    | Career success, professional vitality, protean career, age and work   | Professional vitality can be seen as an essential part of a successful career, professional vitality and age at work maximize at the age of 57.   | Cross sectional study,<br>N=545  |

## **APPENDIX 2**

In order to investigate the differences between the discussed theories in this review and practice, two interviews are conducted. Insights gained by these interviews made it possible to link theoretical findings to organizational implementation regarding careers. The first interviewee is a supervisor at a large project-based engineering and consulting company. The second interviewee is a senior consultant at the same organization. A short summary of both interviews has been provided below.

### **Interviewee 1**

On a daily basis, interviewee 1 is busy with on the one hand working as a project manager in the building sector, on the other hand he is a line manager of a department. As a supervisor he is concerned with the division of the different projects among his subordinates, acquiring new projects from clients and lastly he tries to make his team perform at their best by optimizing the performance of his employees. These last three tasks are combined with his daily tasks previously mentioned which makes his job quite diverse and challenging because he is switching constantly between being a supervisor and being a project manager. The employees of interviewee 1 are quite independent in carrying out tasks and career opportunities. Which means that the employee has a lot of initiative in what he or she wants to accomplish in terms of career. The employees can indicate what tasks or projects they really want to participate in which has a function to motivate them but can also be considered as protean in terms of the employee gets a say in what he wants to achieve or learn. The organization supports the wishes of the employee by offering the right training or projects which are in line with what the employee wants. It could be concluded that the organization expects the employee to be protean which shows furthermore in the assumption of the organization that they employee will lead up to his or her ambitions and contributes to his personal development plan. If an employee lacks these ambitions the organization will support the employee by exploring what opportunities are possible.

Every employee who is employed in this organization works for about 80% of the time on projects and assigned tasks, the other 20% are designed for personal development. This implies that in a fulltime job, an employee has more or less one full working day to work on personal development in terms of participating in training, courses or working on competences etcetera. The interviewee points out that an employee is supported as much as possible to grow

during his or her career which also means that this employee needs to step outside the comfort zone and this is encouraged by the organization.

With regard to this organization and older employees, the interviewee posits some differences between younger and older employees. For instance, there is a difference in applying for a job, younger employees declare that they want to be challenged in their job and have a positive attitude towards travelling to different countries to work on projects. What is salient is that younger employees do not care as much as older employees about the contract that is offered. This indicates that younger employees find stability of a job not very important, they care more about opportunities to learn and to develop themselves. Older employees differ from younger employees the most in terms of possibilities for steadiness in a job. Most of these employees want to know if it is possible to stay for a long time in the organization, preferably until retirement. Because this organization has a reputation of a very low turnover it should be pointed out the especially people who want a stable employment apply for this organization. Older employees care less for development opportunities than younger employees because they know they have a lot of knowledge and competences already.

In terms of the boundaryless career and age, the interviewee states that most of the time older employees have quite a large network inside as well as outside the organization, this is especially true for employees who acquire projects for the team. Therefore, the organization benefits from these employees in terms of projects but also in terms of recruitment and selection. When someone applies for a job who has been active in the same field for a while, information about this applicant is gathered by employees with a big network and therefore interviewee 1 can acquire more in-depth information about an applicant which cannot be acquired through an application letter, CV or a job interview.

## **Interviewee 2**

On a daily basis interviewee 2 works as a senior consultant for the last 35 years, as a senior consultant he works on several projects, sometimes leads these projects and therefore has final responsibility over these projects. Because he is very experienced in his work, he coaches younger employees and supports them in project. These younger employees can ask questions if they are not sure how to proceed and can back them up. Interviewee 1 feels that he can act quite independent in his occupation. With regard to his career, he feels that the choices he made are

dependent on the bandwidth the organization has to offer, meaning there are a lot of opportunities but the range within the boundaries of the organization and what the organization can offer. Basically, interviewee 2 indicates what he finds interesting and on which grounds he wants to develop. On the other side the organization expects him to indicate this and tries to find a training which fits his request or tries to match him to projects that fit his requests. In the light of the protean career this interviewee shows some protean behavior, he follows his own values and interests, however these interests are bounded by the possibilities of the organization (Hall, 1976').

With regard to established routines interviewee 2 poses that as he got older he attended less training and relied more on his knowledge and routines, which is in line with the findings discussed in the results. The findings suggest that older employees have quite some established routines which makes these employees rigid and therefore less able to respond to a changing organization (Segers et al., 2008). Although interviewee 2 finds this true for big changes which involve a lot of extra training interviewee 2 does not agree. If a change requires a lot of training, this interviewee finds that the return on investment is too low considering the number of years he will be employed before he retires. If this happens he tries to compensate for this change with his knowledge and routines. In the beginning of his career he got many instructions in the form of additional training to specify his knowledge he got from study, now he is older he learns new competences like coaching which makes him very valuable for the organization because he can support younger employees.

With regard to the boundaryless career it is argued that employees with a boundaryless career have a large network both in and outside the organization (Arthur, 1994). This assumption is in line with the experience of interviewee 2. However, interviewee 2 states that he does have to keep working in order to maintain his network because a lot of people in his network have almost the same age as he has and they retire and therefore leave his network.