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RETHINKING CAREERS

Introduction

There is much discussion on how work and careers are fundamentally changing. We hear of the disruption of work, jobs, and occupations. Some refer to it as the 'deconstruction' of these – and perhaps of professions as well. This means the disaggregation of work and jobs into individual tasks that makes possible the rethinking or reimagining of how tasks can be completed. Thus, we see the related discussions on automation of repetitive and complex tasks with robotics and artificial intelligence (AI); and on talent ecosystems that provide for the blended use of human talent – whether full-time, part-time, gig, or other platform workers – and AI. This all means that the traditional organisation or 'packaging' of tasks into jobs, occupations and careers as we know it is being disrupted and disaggregated. A career as the progressive aggregation of experiences and positions that allow for upward mobility is said to be no more. The idea of a singular directional career for an individual is being undone and unbundled, giving way to multidirectional and multi-pronged career conceptualisations.

With this disruption of the traditional career and its development, we see the related debates on skills relevance, obsolescence, and the velocity thereof; employability and who takes responsibility for it; changing skills development and credentialing landscape; changing employee-employer relationship; and changing expectations and psychological contract between employee and employer. This illustrates how interconnected these issues are and how central the idea of a career is.

In this Fact Sheet the focus is on how careers are evolving – the suggested ways of rethinking or reimagining careers that we find in academic and industry publications. We sample from the current discussions on the changing form, agency, and boundaries of careers. For example, the ideas of protean and boundary-less careers as well as variations on these themes. We also ask whether this discussion is radically new or there is a sense of déjà vu or revisiting of previous themes and debates. We then explore a report on youth expectations in the developing and African context.

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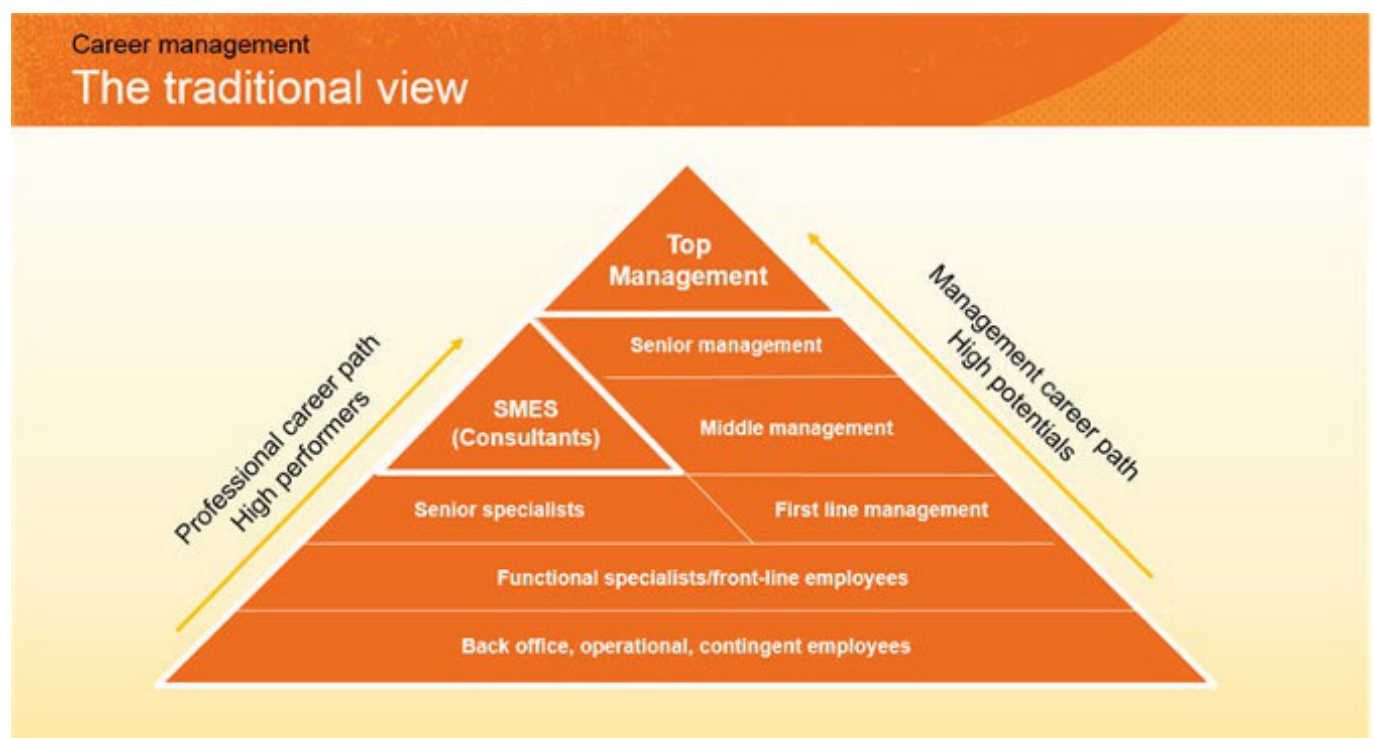
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Changing form, agency, and boundaries of careers

Traditional careers are portrayed as being a linear succession of developmental and progressive work experiences leading to upward mobility within the hierarchy of an organisation (Arthur (2014)¹; Coetzee and Schreuder (2021)²; Jivan³; Sullivan and Baruch (2009)⁴). This is through promotions in higher and senior levels of jobs or positions. There was a clear line of sight from entering the organisation to growing – in steps – within specific occupations and families of jobs in terms of rank, salary, title, and levels of work complexity and management. This progression and mobility occurred within an organisation over time and, thus, there was a certain alignment of this progression and mobility with the individual's development in chronological age and maturity. Therefore, individuals grew within organisations and the major form of mobility was internal to the organisation. That is, intra-organisational mobility rather than the inter-organisational mobility across different organisations that is said to be prevalent today. The below diagram illustrates the traditional intra-organisational movement within the hierarchy for generalists, professionals, and management bands.



Source: Josh Bersin (2016)⁵

The inter-organisational mobility of today means the possibility of upward mobility in a job family or occupation through promotions in different organisations. More importantly, it opens up the possibility of different career pathways across different organisations. This means the boundaries of an individual's career is not circumscribed to the boundaries of one organisation and its hierarchy of jobs, levels, and pathways. A step further, it is suggested that an individual's career is also not circumscribed by the boundaries of job families and occupations defined within and across organisations. We will discuss this idea of boundary-less careers and the protean or shifting nature of careers in the sections that follows. First though we need to make note of the related argument about how changes in traditional organisations and their competitive advantage, business models, and form is informing the change in careers.

1. Arthur, M. B. (2014). The boundaryless career at 20: Where do we stand, and where can we go? *Career Development International*, 19(6), 627-640.
2. Careers. An organisational perspective. Juta: Cape Town.
3. Author of SABPP Fact Sheets cited in below textbox.
4. Sullivan, S. E., & Baruch, Y. (2009). Advances in career theory and research: A critical review and agenda for future exploration. *Journal of Management*, 35(6), 1542-1571.
5. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/reinventing-career-what-should-organizations-do-josh-bersin>



It is argued that traditional careers are embedded within and have been relevant in traditional organisations or corporates, which are suggested to have had long-term stable and predictable business and operating models. This was based on long-run and stable competitive advantage, operations, and pricing. However, it is further argued that these business and operating models are now obsolete as the competitive and the geopolitical and economic landscapes are changing with rapid disruptions and innovations. Technology is foregrounded as one of the key drivers of disruptions and innovations. This includes disruption and innovation of work, the workplace, and the workforce. There is also the disruption of the form and structure of organisations. Organisational hierarchies are being upended and we find suggestions of decentralised, distributed, flat, and boundary-less organisations. Skills relevancy and shelf-life are also being upended with urgent prioritisation of upskilling, multi-skilling, and reskilling of the workforce. Thus, with the boundaryless organisation we see the evolving discussion of the boundary-less career.⁶



For more details see for example the Fact Sheets on innovation and disruption; the future forms of organisations; reinventing organisations, jobs, employment and definition of employees; worker future readiness, employability, and activism; future human lifespan and the employee life cycle.



6. Arthur, M. B. (2014). The boundaryless career at 20: Where do we stand, and where can we go? *Career Development International*, 19(6), 627-640.
Arnold, J. (2011). 21st century career concepts: Magic, measurement, and career capital. *The Psychologist*, 21(2), 106-109.



DEFINING CAREERS

How do we define careers then given the discussion of disruption and change? Sullivan et al (2009) state that “traditionally, careers were typically defined in terms of an individual’s relationship to an employing organization” (p1542)⁷ and mobility therein as previously noted. They add that “while in the past careers were usually defined in terms of the employer-employee relationship, contemporary scholars tend to define careers much more broadly” (p1543). They suggested at the time of their review, however, that there is “no agreement among scholars on a common definition of career” (ibid).

Sullivan et al provide the following working definition of a career: “an individual’s work-related and other relevant experiences, both inside and outside of organizations, that form a unique pattern over the individual’s life span” (italics added, ibid). This definition, rather than being prescriptive, allows for the exploration of:

1. an individual’s varied experiences within and across different organisations, industries, and economic systems as well as outside of these established institutions;
2. the interplay between contextual and an individual’s personal factors across the lifespan;
3. how an individual navigates and makes sense and meaning of this interplay and the range of his or her experiences across his or her lifespan.

It highlights both physical and psychological mobility.

“ This definition recognizes both physical movements, such as between levels, jobs, employers, occupations, and industries, as well as the interpretation of the individual, including his or her perceptions of career events (e.g., viewing job loss as failure vs. as an opportunity for a new beginning), career alternatives (e.g., viewing limited vs. unlimited options), and outcomes (e.g., how one defines career success). Moreover, careers do not occur in a vacuum. An individual’s career is influenced by many contextual factors, such as national culture, the economy, and the political environment, as well as by personal factors, such as relationships with others (e.g., dual-career marriages)

As will be noted below, the changing conceptualisation of career focuses on individual agency and an individual’s responsibility for his or her own career. It is contrasted with the previous focus on the organisation and the organisation taking the lead for an employee’s career development. Thus, we see the shift to careers being seen as protean, meaning it is driven by the individual and it changes over time and in different spaces (whether different organisations or outside of organisations). And we see careers as not being bounded or limited to an organisation as supposedly in the past. Therefore, careers are conceptualised as being boundaryless – not being bounded or limited to one or other organisations.

⁷ Sullivan, S. E., & Baruch, Y. (2009). Advances in career theory and research: A critical review and agenda for future exploration. *Journal of Management*, 35(6), 1542-1571.





Before we delve into the protean and boundaryless careers, and variations on these themes, we need to perhaps reconsider the rationalist assumptions and the assumptions of boundary-lessness and of abundant experiences and opportunities that are available and accessible. This is the argument of Akkermans, Seibert, and Mol (2018)⁸ and other critical reviews that point to the limits of viewing individual agency in isolation (or in a social and organisational vacuum) and in abstract rational terms only⁹. Akkermans et al suggest the consideration of career shocks and including this in definitions of careers. They define career shocks as follows:

“ A career shock is a disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual’s control and that triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one’s career. The occurrence of a career shock can vary in terms of predictability, and can be either positively or negatively valenced.

They bring another dimension to the ideas of disruption that we have outlined in the previous discussion. They add the important caveat of positive and negative valence for the individual, that is, the affective and emotional aspects. It cautions us against neglecting the negative valence or emotions as well as the negative consequences and impact on individual’s development, growth, employability, satisfaction, wellbeing, and safety-net for example.



8. Akkermans, J., Seibert, S. E., & Mol, S. T. (2018). Tales of the unexpected: Integrating career shocks in the contemporary careers literature. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 44(1), 1-10.

9. There are many critical reviews available such as: Arnold, J. (2011). 21st century career concepts: Magic, measurement, and career capital. *The Psychologist*, 21(2), 106-109.



PROTEAN AND BOUNDARYLESS CAREERS AND VARIATIONS ON THESE THEMES

The idea of the protean career was introduced to highlight an individual's agency to design, craft, and develop their own careers in contrast to the traditional organisational-bound and organisationally defined career. Sullivan et al (2009) note, in their review of career theory and research, that the protean career is based on the "metaphor of the Greek god Proteus, who could change his shape at will" (p1544). Thus, an individual or "protean careerist [is] able to repack his or her knowledge, skills, and abilities to fit the changing work environment in order to remain marketable" (ibid). Sullivan et al cite two dimensions of the protean career:

“ values driven in the sense that the person's internal values provide the guidance and measure of success for the individual's career; and (2) self-directed in personal career management—having the ability to be adaptive in terms of performance and learning demands

What we need to be aware of here, though, is the complete 'swing in the pendulum' from the organisation to the individual. That is, the complete attribution now, of the responsibility for career development and management as well as employability and relevance, from organisations to individuals. We can suggest that we can critically examine both:

1. how individuals take up their agency and responsibility

and

2. how organisations take responsibility and enact their employment value proposition (EVP) by fostering agency and enabling and creating the conditions and opportunities for individual careers.

Thus, there is an interplay between the organisation and individual. Where an organisation selects only a transactional form of people management and development and does not invest in career development and management of employees, then that is a choice that needs to be clear in terms of the EVP and the expectations and psychological contract between employer and employee.

The idea of a **boundaryless career** builds on the shift from the traditional career and organisations¹⁰. It suggests that individuals seek out and develop their career within, across, and outside of organisations. That is, as noted before, individuals are not bound or limited by an organisation or set of organisations and the ways of crafting and developing careers therein. Sullivan et al outline some of different meanings of the boundaryless career in their review:

“ (a) the stereotypical Silicon Valley career, in which individuals move across the boundaries of separate employers; (b) those of academics or carpenters, that draw validation and marketability from outside the present employer; (c) those of real estate agents, sustained by external networks or information; (d) those that break traditional organizational assumptions about hierarchy and career advancement; (e) those in which the individual rejects existing career opportunities for personal or family reasons; and (f) those based on the interpretation of the career actor, who may perceive a boundaryless future regardless of structural constraints

10. Arnold, J. (2011). 21st century career concepts: Magic, measurement, and career capital. *The Psychologist*, 21(2), 106-109.





The idea of the portfolio career is similar to that of a boundaryless career. In this instance the idea is that one is not bound to one career pathway or even one career. One can develop multiple career pathways in a given job, occupation or role as well as multiple career identities, work, roles, occupations, and meanings, including passion or purpose-projects. It can be seen as a “working style where you combine multiple streams of income—often creating a mix of full or part-time employment, freelancing or working as a consultant.”¹¹ Some suggest that in the post-COVID new normal it is necessary to consider a portfolio career to be agile and resilient given the changes in economic conditions, industries, organisations and their business models, and changes in employee and employer relationships and expectations for example.¹² Here, we could also consider the idea of **side hustles**.

Other variations on, or framing of, the changing career include the following:

Butterfly career

The butterfly career is meant to reflect the current realities that jobs and roles are constantly evolving, and that an individual needs to shift (or fly with ease, given the butterfly analogy,) in between roles and within and across organisations as roles, work, skills, and organisations evolve. Drawing on video gaming as an analogy, Boudreau suggests that within an organisation “employees will move fluidly between different positions acquiring skills and thereby “leveling up”, instead of “winning”, [and] accumulate fulfilling micro experiences.”¹³

Post-corporate career

The idea of the post-corporate career captures the change in organisations’ career systems, where the traditional model of long-term employment and growth within has given way.¹⁴ This means that career paths are continually changing and are not fixed and predictable in the long-term. Thus, individuals need to consider their careers outside of organisations, and hence the name, ‘post-corporate career’.

Kaleidoscope career

Drawing on the analogy of the kaleidoscope, the idea of a kaleidoscope career captures “how individuals change the pattern of their careers by rotating the varied aspects of their lives to arrange their work–non-work roles and relationships in new ways. Individuals examine the choices and options available to create the best fit among various work demands, constraints, and opportunities given their personal values and interests.”¹⁵

Sustainable career

What seems implicit in the above ideas and conceptualisations on careers is the actual change process for an individual and his or her experience thereof. Perhaps we could also suggest here there is also the rationalist assumption of how change occurs at individual, organisational, and socio-economic levels (see the previous discussion on career shocks). There is the neglect of how an individual sustains him or herself. The sustainable career model focuses on change from a sustainability perspective; and in particular from the viewpoint of renewal and from the broader systems and dynamic theoretical frameworks¹⁶. Newman suggests sustainable careers need “planned periods of renewal, times to rest muscles [in the physical and metaphorical sense], add new skills, and undertake important future oriented tasks” (p140). The careers are “flexible and adaptable, changing form and function as business and individual needs change” (ibid).

“To be sustainable throughout life, careers must have three features. They must include renewal opportunities, times when employees pause briefly to reinvigorate themselves. They must be flexible and adaptable. Half of what we think we know now will be obsolete in a few years. Individuals and firms need to be continuous and flexible learners, ready to travel new roads as conditions dictate. Finally, sustainable careers must include opportunities for integration across life spheres and experiences that lead to wholeness, completeness, and meaning

11. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolinecastrillon/2019/09/15/why-its-time-to-consider-a-portfolio-career/?sh=6fb336d0652e>

12. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zktbn9q>

13. John Boudreau quoted in <https://blog.workday.com/en-us/2023/world-work-without-jobs-what-butterfly-careers.html>

14. Peiperl, M., & Baruch, Y. (1997). Back to square zero: The post-corporate career. *Organizational dynamics*, 25(4), 7-22.

15. Sullivan, S.E. and Carraher, S.M. (2022). The Kaleidoscope Career Model. Retrieved, 17 July 2023, from <https://oxfordre.com/business/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190224851.001.0001/acrefore-9780190224851-e-328>

16. Newman, K. L. (2011). Sustainable careers. *Organizational Dynamics*, 40(2), 136.

De Vos, A., Van der Heijden, B. I., & Akkermans, J. (2020). Sustainable careers: Towards a conceptual model. *Journal of vocational behavior*, 117, 103196.

Déjà vu with all that is new?

The way we frame the changing or emerging new forms of career, as discussed above, seem to be predicated on a dichotomy. We find these careers are defined in contrast to, and as the opposite of, the traditional, organisational, or bureaucracy-based career. This dichotomy and the suggestion of the shift from the traditional organisation and career, however, is not new. We could suggest that there is a sense of déjà vu. We have seen this before. If we look back at the ideas of protean, boundaryless, and other forms of careers we will note that these were introduced two decades or more ago. We can see from the dates of the literature reviews that were previously referenced in this Fact Sheet how these ideas have taken hold and evolved over time. Consider the following extracts from Sullivan's 1999 review and the reference to changes in organisations and careers:

“

The way we view careers has dramatically changed. Traditionally, careers were thought to evolve within the context of one or two firms and were conceptualized to progress in linear career stages.

“

[...] the traditional career has dominated U.S. employment because most organizational structures supported it. Now however, the tall, multi-layer, functionally organized structures characteristic of many large companies have changed. Firms have downsized to become more flexible in response to environmental factors such as rapid technological advancements and increased global competition.

“

The psychological employment contract between firms and workers has also altered. Under the old contract, workers exchanged loyalty for job security. Under the new contract, workers exchange performance for continuous learning and marketability¹⁷

This sounds like the current prognosis in various recent publications. Perhaps the following phrase is apt: “history never repeats itself, but it does often rhyme.” There is a sense of déjà vu, but we also need to appreciate the nuances and shifts over time. For example, disruption is not new and has been discussed for decades. However, the form it takes, and the way we understand, describe, and/or prescribe it, does evolve over time across social and historical contexts.

Some reviewers suggest we consider and empirically explore hybrid formations rather than being fixated or bound by a dichotomy or duality. That is, we explore the hybrid formations of traditional and non-traditional careers, where individuals utilise both traditional and non-traditional career pathways and opportunities where they can and that meets their requirements at the time. Here, we can note the criticism of the confusion of description and prescription, where it is unclear whether we are describing the realities of careers or prescribing how we would like to see careers. This brings us to our own biases and how we see the present and the past and future; how we project into the past notions of stability, tradition, and unchanging nature in contrast to our experience of the present and what the future will be; and how we lack the understanding of careers from different class, race, and gender lenses.

17. Sullivan, S. E. (1999). The changing nature of careers: A review and research agenda. *Journal of management*, 25(3), 457-484.





Take the following observation by Cohen, Duberley, and Mallon (2004)¹⁸ of the state of the literature at the time of their review:

“

There is some consensus that careers are changing or have been transfigured and much agreement about the direction of that change. The old, stultifying world of traditional, hierarchical careers is said to have given way to a more liberating and all-embracing career world based on the accumulation of skills and knowledge and the integration of personal and professional life

Now consider their point that from “from a social constructionist’s gaze, the “old” and “new” might not look quite so different after all” (p420) when we closely examine the individual and organisational realities of the old and the new. Thus, the authors invite us to critically examine our own theoretical and methodological assumptions and values; and how we construct these notions of the traditional and new.

We can add that we need to examine how we construct boundaries and the ways these do shift over time and space. As some of the critical reviewers of the boundaryless career noted, although the idea of boundaryless and abundant opportunities may be appealing, we need to acknowledge that there are always boundaries, barriers, and limits as well as trade-offs in the real world of finite sets of opportunities, resources, and time. However, this does not mean the lack of agency. We need to understand individual agency in career development and management in social and historical context.

18. Cohen, L., Duberley, J., & Mallon, M. (2004). Social constructionism in the study of career: Accessing the parts that other approaches cannot reach. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 64(3), 407-422.



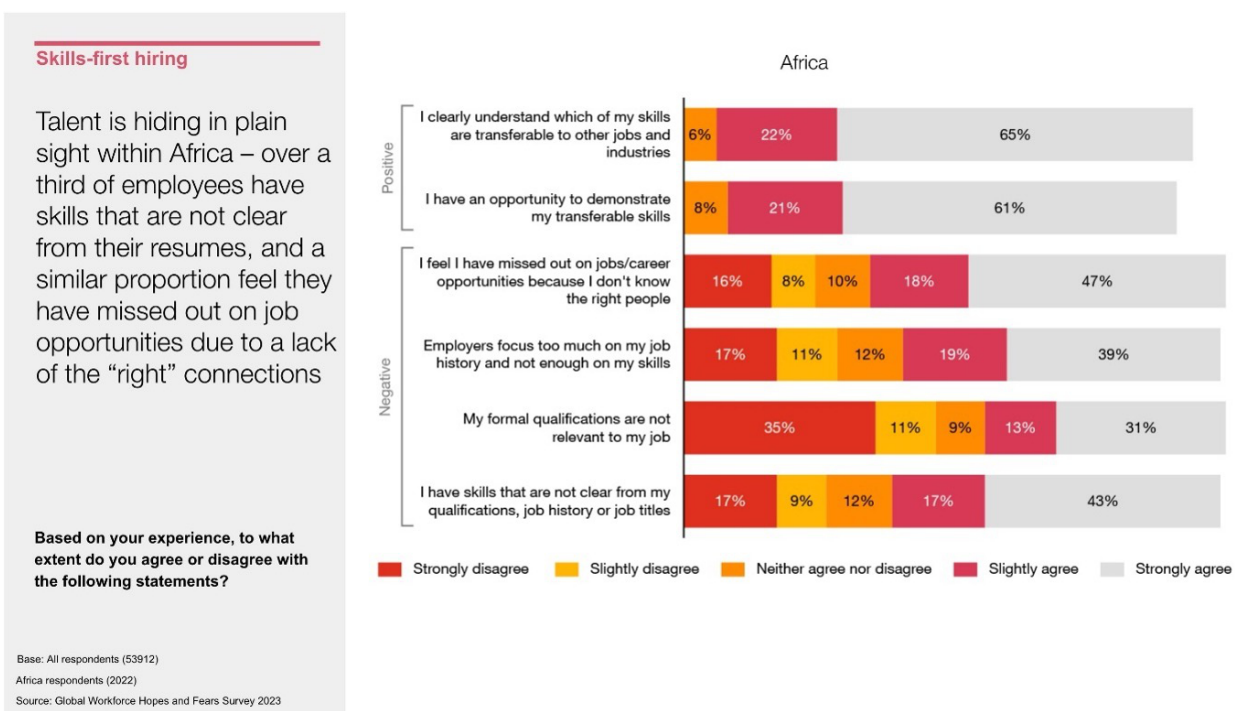
What are the expectations of youth in Africa

As HR practitioners we need to understand our various stakeholders in context in relation to their career expectations, development, and management. As was noted previously, we need to critically examine our biases when understanding and engaging various stakeholders. This includes our biases regarding the expectations of different segments of youth in Africa. We need to interrogate our inferences and generalisations from global surveys regarding these expectations. There is certainly a dearth of research on and from developing contexts.

A recent survey that could provide some insight is the PwC's 2023 Global Workforce Hopes and Fears Survey. It sampled "nearly 2,200 workers across South Africa, Algeria, Kenya, Morocco and Nigeria" (PWC, 2023)¹⁹. Some of the findings highlighted include the following:

- "25% of the Africa workforce respondents have two jobs.
- 55% are satisfied with their job, similar to global respondents (56%).
- 84% of the Africa workforce respondents believe that being adaptable and flexible is the most important skill for their career in the next five years.
- 39% of Africa workforce respondents believe that their employers focus too much on job history and not enough on skills.
- 79% of the Africa workforce respondents actively seek out opportunities to learn and develop new skills" (italics added).

The report suggests that talent is "hiding in plain sight", where the respondents indicate that their skills are not 'visible' or clear in their resumes or CVs. The respondents also suggest that they understand which skills are transferable and have opportunities to demonstrate these; and that being adaptable and flexible is an important skill. However, the report notes in relation to the upskilling question that "employees display a lack of urgency about upskilling. Only a third of employees believe the skills required to do their [current] job will change significantly in the next five years." See the PWC infographics below for more details.

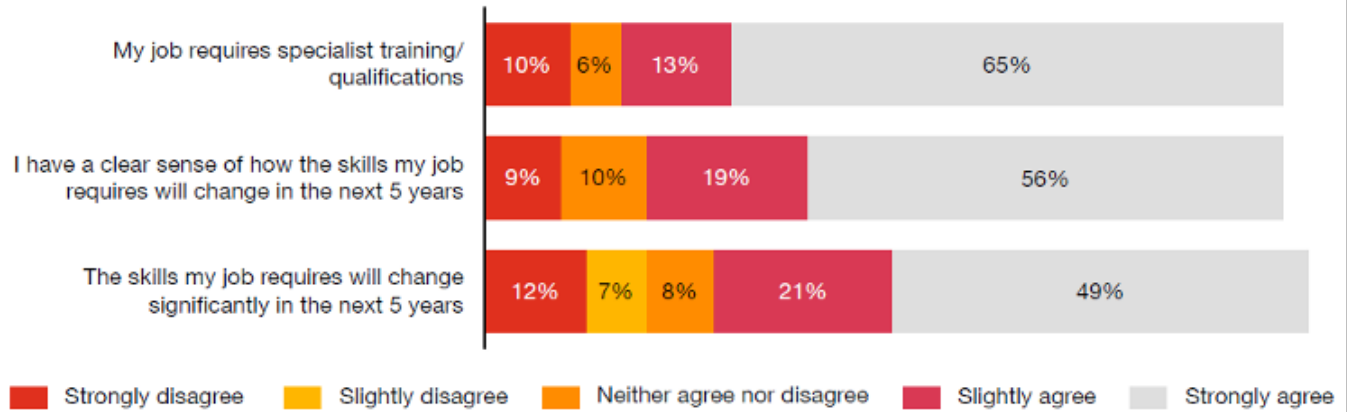


19. PwC's Global Workforce Hopes and Fears Survey 2023 - African Perspectives



Regarding your current role, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Africa



The above findings suggest various questions such as the following. How will this inform career development and management in your South African organisation? How will you as the HR practitioner approach the crafting of careers and upskilling in your organisation? How is this informed by the business and people strategy, including the EVP? How will you make visible the talent “hiding in plain sight”? How will you develop the agency of young talent? What is the needed relationship and interplay between the individual and organisation in setting career expectations, development, and management? How will this relationship and interplay be realised? Do you need to disrupt how careers are practiced and the way skilling is done in your organisation?

And lastly, how do you see your career as a HR practitioner? Do you need upskilling? Do you need to disrupt your own career or is your career being disrupted?

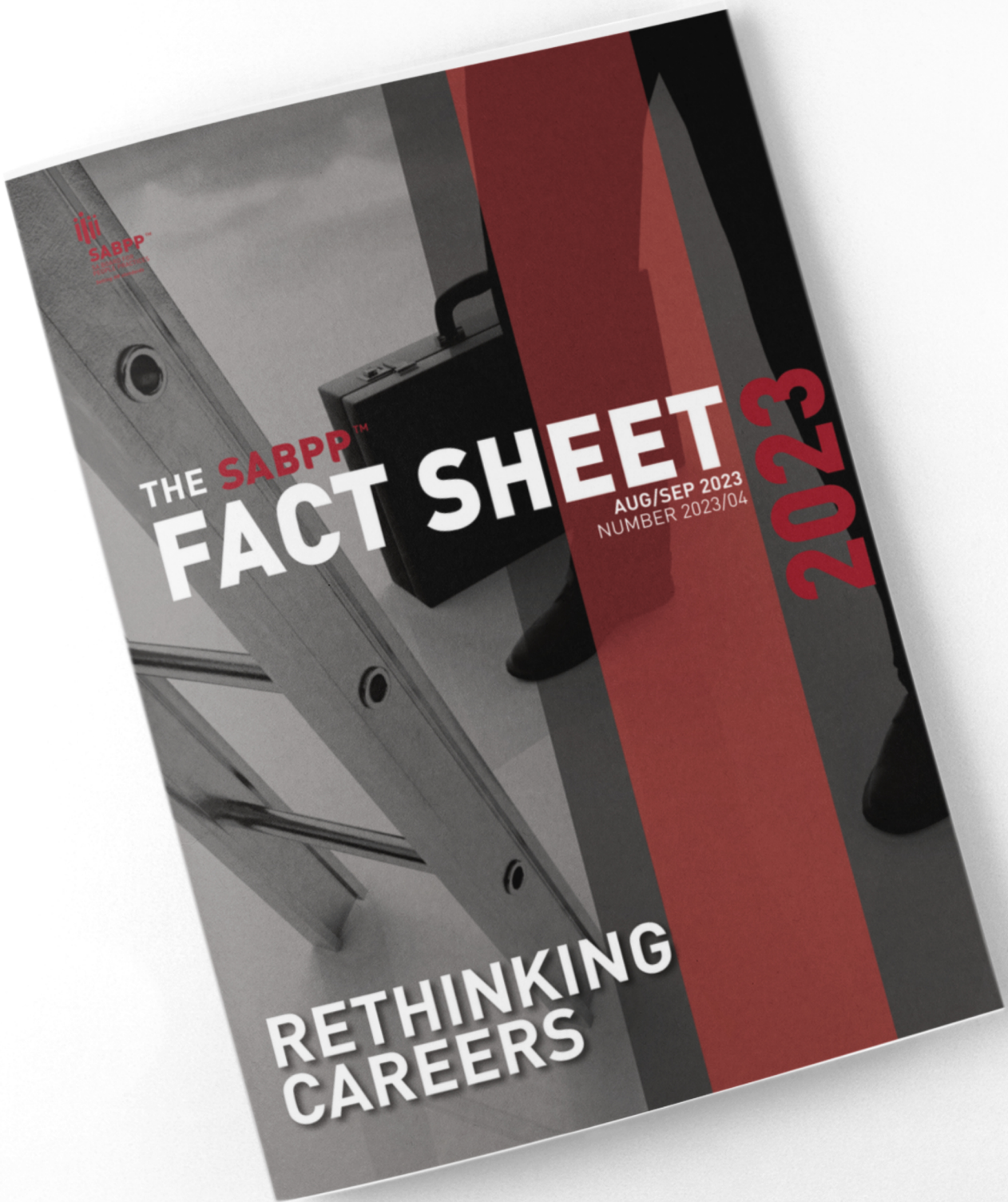


Conclusion

It bears repeating, “history never repeats itself, but it does often rhyme.” This is not to say we ignore quantitative and qualitative differences across time, space, contexts, and geographies. And it does not mean that it’s all the same across time. As critical people practitioners we need to appreciate both continuities and discontinuities as well as both similarities and differences. We need to understand how we are constructing or framing the dichotomy of traditional and non-traditional or new. We need to interrogate the implications for people management and development and the sustainability thereof in a systemic and integrated manner. We need to heed lessons from, and the trials and tribulations of, the past.

Disruption and the protean and boundaryless careers may be alluring on paper. It can be exciting as it is suggestive of something different or divergent from the norm. Or perhaps it is an escape from the stultifying bureaucracy and what we see as the traditional, to adapt one of the previously quoted reviews. However, we need to carefully examine what the disruption of work, jobs, occupations, and careers means and what are the implications and the unspoken and unintended consequences thereof. As HR practitioners we need detail the implications for people development and management – the employee value proposition, employment/employee life cycle, the HR value chain, and investment in human capital for example. The HR Standards System Standard Model could help here as a roadmap. As professional practitioners we need to also consider our role as people champions or stewards. Consider some of the debates on the need for people-centred approaches to the new world of work for example.





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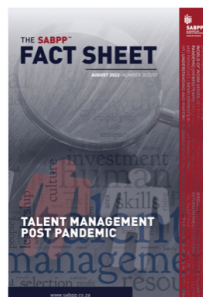
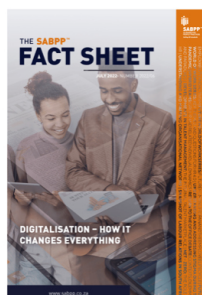
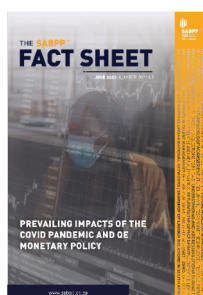
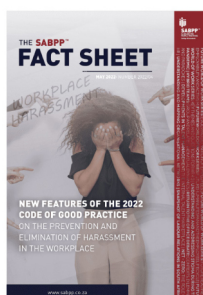
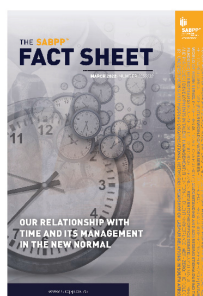
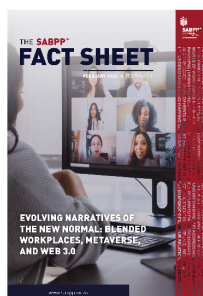


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