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**Shifting Careers, Shifting Organizations: Developing  
Careers across Organizational Boundaries**

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## ABSTRACT

The notion of career has been subject to a burgeoning literature in recent years, stimulated amongst other things, by the work on boundary-less careers and organizations. Whilst this literature has also been subject to a number of critiques, especially in relation to its supposed positive spin and the typicality of such careers, it has remained an important part of the HRM scene. However, despite their importance as an increasingly significant component of most developed economies, there has been a dearth of research on how careers may – or may not – develop across organizational boundaries which form part of wider networks. One major aspect of these so-called ‘new’ organizational forms is public-private contracting, and it is particularly important to analyse how careers may change for people whose jobs are transferred from the public to the private sector. These are likely to be the people whose career path was relatively stable and laid-out in the public sector but who now face a less settled and prescribed future after being transferred to the private sector. Of course some of these individuals find their future career paths limited and constraining, but at the same time others, particularly those engaged in boundary-spanning roles, find new opportunities arise which often take them into quite different labour markets. In order to illustrate the shifting nature of careers in these contexts we draw upon over 100 interviews with managers and professionals in three public-private partnerships: housing benefit administration, teaching and health care. We argue that the careers developed in the context of these new organizational forms cannot be theorised by simply categorising some individuals as ‘winners’ and others as ‘losers’ and show how individual careers can shape the relative success or failure of these new contracting arrangements as individuals negotiate between past and present organizational structures and cultures.

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# **SHIFTING CAREERS, SHIFTING ORGANIZATIONS: DEVELOPING CAREERS ACROSS ORGANIZATIONAL BOUNDARIES**

GAIL HEBSON, MICK MARCHINGTON AND FANG LEE COOKE <sup>a</sup>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of career has been the subject of a burgeoning literature in recent times. This has been stimulated, amongst other things, by the idea that ‘boundaryless’ organizations have massive implications for so-called traditional career paths of individuals who had worked long-term for a single employer or in a single occupation or profession. Although there are many varieties of boundaryless organization (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), most interest has focused on the way in which networks shift responsibility from the employer to the individual to manage their own career. Indeed, in some of the more extreme variants of this concept, it is assumed that individuals float freely within and between labour markets, choosing which is best suited to their own needs and expectations. To some extent this may have been influenced by changes in industry structure, as in Silicon Valley or in television-programme making in the UK, where a large number of small firms have sprung up to provide services for the large TV companies (see, for example, Currie et al, 2006). Many of these publications imply that the move away from organizationally-based careers is positive because it frees individuals from the constraints that are often seen to characterise ‘vertical’ careers. (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996)

There are several lines of critique of the concept of ‘boundaryless’ careers. Some have argued that, for most individuals, the so-called ‘traditional’ career was more

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rhetoric than reality, and that the security of a career within a single organization was reserved for the fortunate few who made it through the hierarchy (Edwards and Wajcman, 2005). Others have argued that the career paths of managers have been always been characterised by movement between different functions, and organizations, as they gain experience by zig-zagging (Kelly and Gennard, 2000). Yet others argue that the traditional career was basically a preserve of men who could follow the uninterrupted working patterns required to move up the corporate hierarchy (Halford et al, 1997). By far the most sustained critique, however, is that the concept has been articulated in far too optimistic a manner, and that ideas have been generalised from some very specific circumstances where individuals have been able to use their own labour market power to progress their own careers (Edwards and Wacjman, 2005). Whilst there are undoubtedly examples of career progress through networks, which take them further than might have been achieved through an employer's internal human resource practices, there are many other cases where workers have suffered due to organizational down-sizing and the contracting-out of activities previously delivered in-house (Marchington et al, 2005).

There is also a gap in this literature, specifically in the area of public-private contracting. This has been a significant aspect of organizational life in the UK, and many other developed countries, over the past two decades, as government has sought to open up public service provision to the private sector. Nowadays, it is typical to find, and in many cases it is a requirement that, a range of services – such as catering, cleaning and security – are subject to private sector tenders. Beyond the delivery of such basic services, it is also common to find that professional work is now provided by workers who are not employed by the organization whose clients (patients, council house residents, school children) are being served. This can take many forms, such as agency and bank nurses, teacher supply agencies, and privatised housing benefit services. In some cases the work is actually transferred to another employer – such as in the case where a private sector firm supplies workers to perform the contract on behalf of or in conjunction with the public service provider. This might involve the initial transfer of workers from the public to the private sector employer, although over time the influence of the original workers will be diluted due to labour turnover and the recruitment of new staff. In other cases, workers from two or more organizations actually work alongside each other – on the ward or in the

classroom, for example – and the individual client may be unable to tell which person works for which employer. In these situations, wages and other terms and conditions of employment may vary significantly, and careers can take quite different trajectories.

At least three separate scenarios can be envisaged, and these form the basis of this paper. First, there are likely to be individuals who are less enamoured by changing organizational forms, more reluctant to engage with the philosophy and culture of their ‘new’ employer, and ultimately continue to hanker after the previous regime when technical skill was valued. These people might have been the subject of ‘involuntary’ transfer, in the sense that they do not subscribe to the ways in which private sector organizations operate, perhaps regarding the notion of profit as anathema to the provision of public services. Their careers are likely to emerge in a haphazard way, to some extent buffeted by the power of different forces. However, a significant minority of this group do not feel out of control of their careers, as they have chosen to ‘self-select’ themselves out of career opportunities because of the conflicts of interests they feel. Rather, they concentrate on doing their job well and have no desire to progress their careers at present. Second, some workers might just shift from one career path to another, taking advantage of the move from a primarily technical trajectory (as for example in housing benefit operations) to one which relies much more on the application of entrepreneurial skills in a range of different commercial situations. Whilst they continue to work in the same sort of area, they are persuaded by the ‘new’ managerial logic which informs the practices of the private sector provider. These workers are likely to be the most satisfied with their lot, largely because they have adapted to the new organizational form and have grasped opportunities to hone out a new career. The final group are what we call ‘boundary spanning agents’ and these are people who move into new opportunities which arise specifically to deal with the management of contracts across organizational boundaries. Their jobs, which require knowledge of how both partners operate, are critically important in ensuring that the ultimate ‘customer’ – patient, school child, citizen – gets continuing value for money once services have been put out to the private sector. They might work on either side of the contract or indeed for a new organization that is formed purely to manage the contract. Whilst these individuals need entrepreneurial skills, their work also requires an acute sensitivity to issues of

power and service quality across organizational boundaries (Williams, 2002), and they need an ability to manage individuals over whom they have no hierarchical power.

This sets the framework for the remainder of the paper. In the next section we review briefly the literature on careers. Then we move on to outline the core features of the three cases from which our data is drawn (a PFI at an acute NHS Trust, the relationship between an agency and a number of schools to provide supply teachers, and housing benefit operations through a public-private partnership), as well as provide some background information about the wider project on employment across organizational boundaries (Marchington et al, 2005). The three scenarios are then analysed in turn, making use of quotes from respondents to illustrate the main findings. Finally we bring the paper together with some conclusions; basically we argue that, rather than careers shifting from one form (internal employment) to another (boundaryless), instead they continue to take a number of forms depending on the nature of commercial contracts between organizations, the type of work undertaken and the organizational form(s) which are set up to provide public services. Furthermore, we wish to challenge the dichotomy between winners and losers that arises in much current research about changing careers and argue for a more nuanced portrayal and analysis of career change.

## 2. CAREERS IN CHANGING ORGANIZATIONAL FORMS

At present, the debate around careers revolves around whether we have seen the demise of the 'career job'. Academics have asked 'are career jobs dead' (Cappelli, 1999; Edwards and Wajcman, 2005) and if so, what are they being replaced with?

There is no doubt that many characteristics of organizational change destabilise the traditional structures that have supported career jobs. Downsizing, outsourcing and delayering all undermine internal labour markets by eroding the possibilities of intra-firm mobility. An internal labour market, premised on gradual vertical progression within a single firm and a natural skills progression based upon a mixture of firm-specific skills and technical knowledge is no longer guaranteed (Grimshaw et al,

2002). The 'buying rather than making' of skills that comes with the external hiring of expertise such as consultants and contactors has been identified as 'the nail in the coffin of the internal labour market' as promotion opportunities for those in the firm dwindle and cycles of poaching perpetuate firms' lack of investment in skills and careers (Cappelli, 1999).

At the individual level such developments break-up old certainties. The linkages between career and life cycle have been undermined with no guarantees that seniority will be rewarded (Savage, 2005) Outsourcing and partnerships and the inter-organizational relationships that form the basis of such arrangements mean employees are working in multi-employer contexts, often accountable to parties other than their employer, with identities becoming more complex, multiple and fragmented (Marchington et al, 2005). This has key implications for the psychological contract. The mutuality implicit in the psychological contract, where organizational loyalty is repaid with career progression, is overturned by many of these developments. A 'new contract' has been identified which shakes up the traditional responsibilities of employers; employees no longer expect a job for life and only ask for the resources to enhance their employability (Heriot and Pemberton, 1996).

The individual response to such organizational developments is argued to be the 'boundaryless career' (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Research evidence of specific knowledge based industries are used to support the claims of boundarylessness as workers move between firms, sharing the knowledge and networks they have gained previously and building up new knowledge and networks that they will use to tap into opportunities elsewhere. It is important to recognise that the literature around boundaryless careers represents a 'perspective'. Arthur and Rousseau (1995: 11) warn of the perils of relying too much on one firm for career opportunities and advocate a new approach to careers if people are to survive, one which puts personal responsibility and social networks to the fore:

'The boundaryless career perspective suggests that people take responsibility for their own career futures. If they are to do so 'cultivating networks' and gaining access to other people's knowledge are resources are fundamental steps'.

Thus individuals become responsible for making themselves more 'employable' (Kanter, 1989) and have to develop entrepreneurial skills to take advantage of new opportunities that arise. Personality traits such as adaptability and flexibility are seen as key to success in this new organizational landscape while firm specific knowledge is becoming 'wasted knowledge' (McCarthy and Hall, 2000). Individuals do not seek a sense of belonging to the firm, but pursue 'projects of the self' (Grey, 1994) where the firm only has to provide the ingredients for future employability. Fundamentally, the boundaryless career 'views firms being changed by, as well as bringing change upon, individual careers...'(Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; 12).

This idea is central not only to discussion of boundaryless careers but in understandings of new organizational forms where boundary spanners become central in smoothing over new inter-organizational relationships (Marchington et al, 2005). In these situations managers make use of what Adler and Kwon (2002) call the 'bridging' aspect of social capital in order to develop and sustain relationships. Individuals act as brokers between current and former employers and build up entrepreneurial networks outside of their own firm. This social capital becomes key in both shaping the individuals' and organizations' success. Following Williams' (2002) framework, there are a number of key features of the work undertaken by boundary spanning agents which requires the development and utilisation of skills that go beyond those normally required within organizations. These are:

- (a) Building sustainable relationships, with the ability to visualise reality from the perspective of others, developing trust across organizational boundaries in the context of commercial contracts with strict performance standards and a system of penalties.
- (b) Managing through influence and negotiation, in the absence of being able to use authority relations within the firm, which requires the careful use of persuasion skills.
- (c) Managing complexity and interdependencies, with a range of skills such as technical expertise, experience of different cultures and creative and entrepreneurial abilities.
- (d) Managing roles, accountabilities and motivations, in a context where tensions and contradictions are always apparent, which requires the use of delicate and sensitive reactions and flexible stances to gain agreement.

While much of the literature surrounding the boundaryless career is optimistic about the new opportunities, freedom and choice such a career can bring, it is also recognised that much boundarylessness is involuntary (Raider and Burt, 1996; Cohen and Mallon 1999). Often job instability has 'pushed' employees into relationships with multi-employers and while the new skills of entrepreneurship, networking, 'resilience' and adaptability can form the crux of new careers for those who are educated and have these personal qualities, those who are less educated and do not have these personal qualities are severely disadvantaged (Raider and Burt, 1996; Savage, 2005).

It is important to note that recent research evidence questions the extent of change in careers, and particularly undermines the claims of 'boundarylessness' as the norm. Edwards and Wajcman (2005) tackle this directly and remind us that the idea of a 'career job' always had a 'mythical' element to it, especially when analysing the career trajectories of women that have never followed a continuous pattern. An overview of current research in the UK shows continuing evidence of internal labour markets within firms, with a growth in managerial jobs, job tenure rates remaining constant and an increase in employers offering career progression for employees (Goos and Manning, 2003; White et al; 2004). Sturges et al's (2000: 364) work on new graduates' career expectations shows that graduates still have very high expectations of career management and career self management is a complement to rather than a substitute for organizational management of careers. Edwards and Wajcman (2005) concur with Jacoby that we are seeing is a 'reallocation of risk' rather than the decline of career type jobs where individual workers are bearing more of the responsibility and risk of the employment relationship. It is certainly the case that the opportunities on offer at present may simply reflect specific economic conditions rather than a commitment to careers per se. For example, White et al's (2004) survey shows this was the case in tight labour market conditions where employers are offering career jobs to keep hold of scarce skills. If these economic conditions change the growth of these career opportunities may be undermined.

Although much of this research challenges images of freedom and opportunities which have been associated with boundaryless careers, it is important to note the contribution this debate has made to our understanding of careers, in particular the

recognition that employment should not be treated as internal to the firm (Arthur and Rousseau 1996). In the public sector, the reality for many workers and managers is movement across from the public to the private sector while still delivering a public service. However, at present a 'winners versus losers' dichotomy tends to be used to understand the changing careers that emerge in this context. For example, Mulholland (1998) distinguishes between the public sector 'survivors' and the newly recruited 'movers and shakers' in her study of a large water company that had been privatised and was going through constant reorganization. She contrasts the declining value of the technical engineering expertise held by older ex-public sector workers with the highly valued enterprising skills of the newly recruited, although she does argue both are vulnerable to job insecurity in different ways. Grimshaw et al's (2002) case study of change in a local authority presents a 'winner takes all' scenario, where those who are willing to work long hours and take responsibility for their training and performance are successful, while the majority who are unable or unwilling to do this find their careers floundering. In both of these studies there is a dichotomy between winners and losers, where the winners display new personal qualities such as entrepreneurialism rather than technical expertise. However, in the following discussion our three scenarios present a more complex picture where definitions of winning and losing are not so easily sub-divided into such a simple dichotomy. Moreover, perceptions of winning and losing contain a strong subjective element as well, and can not be classified on the basis of zero sum analyses.

### 3. PUBLIC-PRIVATE CONTRACTS IN PRACTICE

The empirical data reported in this paper comes from a three-year, ESRC funded research project investigating changing organizational forms and the reshaping of work. It involved eight in-depth case studies of various organizational forms, including franchises, employment agencies, private finance initiatives (PFI), partnerships, supply chain relationships, and outsourcing. This paper draws on data from three cases which involved outsourcing relationships between the public and private sector.

The first case was a private finance initiative (PFI) incorporating a large acute hospital which resulted in the outsourcing of ancillary services including estate maintenance, laundry, cleaning and catering services to a number of private specialist firms in the consortium. As a result, more than 500 people, including junior managers and supervisors, were transferred to the private firms. In addition to bringing in their own senior managers, the private firms poached four operations managers who had been running these activities in the hospital to help operate the newly acquired services.

The PFI case was the most complex of the three because of the sheer size and scope of the contract and the number of private contractors involved. Performance monitoring and negotiations took place on a daily basis at different levels among the parties despite the relatively tight specifications of the contract. This process was facilitated by the creation of a micro-agency firm, the Special Purposes Vehicle (SPV) which comprised just three people – the general manager, a deputy manager and a secretary. The SPV had an independent role in ensuring the performance of the PFI consortium firms matched that specified in the contract. SPV managed the PFI as a broker, it provided performance audits and was responsible for delivering the financial penalty to the PFI consortium if their performance failed to meet the target. The hospital Trust paid SPV a tariff each month which was then passed onto the private contractor firms according to the quantity and quality of service they provided.

The second case involved the contracting-out of housing benefits operations from a local authority in London (Council X) to a private sector firm specialising in customer relations management (TCS – Total Customer Solutions). Given continuing pressure from government to benchmark their services against the private sector, Council X decided to outsource Housing Benefits to the private sector as a 'strategic move to search for radical thinking, innovation and an opportunity to sweep away old cultures and work practices' including the problematic industrial relations. The Council was keen to find a quality service provider rather than the cheapest contractor, and TCS was considered the best bidder among the four that were invited to tender. TCS impressed the Council by proposing a substantial package which involved genuine shared risk and reward, the transfer of about 100 Council employees, considerable investment in IT systems, training and property, and continuous improvement of key

performance indicators (KPIs). A seven-year deal was agreed between the Council and TCS with the support of the trade union, UNISON. TCS administers the housing benefits service on behalf of Council X, but the decision making process remains firmly in the hand of the council for legislative reasons. This has, at times, served as a main reason for the delay of the services and a main source of tensions between the staff employed by TCS and those working for the council. About 30 workers were made redundant as part of the transfer process, but TCS subsequently used a small number of agency workers to cover staff shortages.

Housing benefits administration is a complex service to deliver successfully whether it is kept in-house or outsourced, a situation often underestimated by the private sector service supplier and worsened by constant changes in housing legislation. This is evidenced by the fact that many outsourced housing benefits had reported failure or running into difficulties at the time of our study. As a result, on-going performance monitoring and re-negotiations prove necessary to keep service provision on the track for both contractual parties. A number of senior managers from both sides act as boundary spanning agents, in addition to those transferred from the council to TCS.

The final case is the contract between TeacherTemp, one of the largest teacher supply agencies in the UK, and a number of schools from the North West of England. The agency engages over 10,000 teachers and support staff providing more than 13,000 teacher-days each week to 15,000 schools. This represents 10% of the total market, estimated at 40,000 supply teachers, although many supply teachers are registered with more than one agency. During the period the case study was investigated, teacher shortages reached a high; approximately 5000 permanent jobs remained unfilled in secondary schools in England in 2001 and, in addition, there was evidence that 40% of those who completed teacher training did not become teachers (Johnson 2001). The case-study research focused specifically upon two offices of TeacherTemp in the North West area, one in a large city with 500 teachers on its books and the other in a large town with 300 teachers, but both supplying around 200 teachers a week. Both offices have six consultants and a business manager. Each office employed a specialist primary, secondary, and special educational needs co-ordinator who selected and recruited teachers and teaching assistants, and each

aimed to achieve a minimum budget of teacher-days; the case study offices had to reach a target of 657 teacher-days per week. In addition, there are targets set based on annual office growth of between 10–20% over budget and a team bonus scheme for those offices that meet these targets.

Semi-structured interviews were the main method of data collection, supplemented by a limited amount of on-site observation. Over 100 interviews were undertaken across the three cases over a period of two years. Respondents included managers from a range of levels, supervisors, trade union representatives and staff. In the case of the teacher supply and housing benefits cases, this involved interviews with professional workers such as teachers and housing benefit officers, who would traditionally look to a career in more than organization over the course of their working lives, but typically remaining within their professional network. Wherever possible interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, thus meaning that we could continually return to the tapes to follow different lines of enquiry.

## 1. 'Sceptics'

The first group we have identified are the 'sceptics', those workers who remain unconvinced by the shift to new (private sector) organizational forms and are reluctant to engage with the philosophy and culture of their 'new' employer. This group can be found in other studies of public sector change (Mulholland, 1998) and are often presented as the victims of change. In relation to our Teacher Supply Case, there was some evidence of this. Half of the teachers we spoke with started working as supply teachers while looking for permanent work. While the agency emphasised the freedom supply work could bring, this group preferred to work on long-term supply in order to create the feelings of belonging to one organization and the relationships with pupils and colleagues that were part of this. They wanted the agency to find them work at a suitable school in a subject area that fitted their specialism but those teachers who had failed to develop good relationships with the agency staff were disappointed. They were left vulnerable to short term supply and working in the 'difficult' schools where other teachers did not want to teach. In this context they were finding it difficult to develop careers and used the profit motive of

the private sector agency to rationalise why it did not have their career interests at heart:

'It is like we have got this line of soldiers and these many gaps. Let us just get them in, lets just get bodies in class rooms and get the money in. It is a business and that is why they are doing it so from one perspective that is fair enough. From another it is like, come on this is my career we are talking about, I want to get into a job and stay there'. (School A, supply teacher 1, male)

Similar views were expressed in the PFI case, where ex-NHS workers were unhappy with the application of the profit motive to a hospital context and coped with this by withdrawing their commitment to the new employer. The emphasis on making money to provide value for shareholders did not fit with their ideals and they felt the company had little interest in their needs as staff were low down the list of priorities. Accordingly, staff emphasised that they just 'got by' rather than engaging with the way in which the private sector employer attempted to meet its objectives. One of the chefs said:

'I'll be honest, no-one's happy. I mean I like to come in, produce good food, do my best on cooking, and pick my pay-slip up. I mean you can't expect more of people'. (Hotel Services Company, chef 1, male)

Others were more prepared to criticise the way in which the new private sector employer operated, indicating they saw little reason to want to work with and for that organization. For example, comments were made about the requirement to log every activity rather than, in the past, work beyond contract in the best interests of patients. The lack of commitment to the new employer was exacerbated because staff felt the company had little knowledge of how things were done at the hospital; as one remarked, 'FMCo (the private sector company) haven't got a clue about what is going on. They are bloody useless.'

However, in the TCS case study the sceptics did not see themselves merely as victims; some had taken a decision to reject the culture of the new organization and

therefore did not want to progress. Two motivations underlay this reluctance (and resistance). Firstly, the new contracting arrangement was perceived to undermine traditional public sector values by introducing the profit motive. In TCS, case workers in particular who had transferred to TCS struggled with the moral implications of making profit out of a business that served vulnerable people. The quotations below are typical;

'If I wanted go to work for a private company I would have applied for a job in the private sector. The way we see things are totally different. I am not driven by profit or bonuses, if I wanted a job like that I would have applied for a job like that'. (TCS (L) caseworker 3, female)

Another factor that made some workers 'sceptics' was a rejection of the characteristics that were now deemed necessary to succeed. In TCS, many of the case workers did not see the new managers as role models to aspire to because they lacked the technical knowledge of housing benefits and therefore case workers lacked confidence in their management abilities. While local authority managers in the past had been able to help them with difficult cases, TCS managers did not have the knowledge to do this and therefore case workers neither respected or aspired to this role;

'My line manager came from Council X . He has changed a lot. He is more of a TCS man. And I tell him. I say I am surprised you are going along with this because you know that it won't work and we will go back to square one. The other thing that has changed is that line managers under Council X could help us with the more difficult cases. They've lost that skill'. ( TCS (L), caseworker 4 female)

'They might have worked on a call centre but they don't know how difficult my job is and the certain rules and regulations I have to abide by to have a claim passed. People coming in with no HB experience at all on quite a high management level and they expect me in so many minutes to do x y and z but they've never done x y and z themselves so that is very frustrating and I think there is a lot of resentment and that will continue'. (TCS (L), caseworker 3, female)

For this group technical expertise was still seen as the legitimate route to career advancement and TCS had been unable to successfully 'embed' the new culture of customer service and 'enterprise' into the commitments and motivations of this group.

## 2. 'Opportunists'

In contrast, a second group we identified were those who embraced the new opportunities and culture that arose in the new contracting arrangements. This group recognized that the ingredients for a successful career were certainly changing in line with much of the boundaryless career literature, with personal characteristics rather than technical knowledge fundamental to success. For example, in TCS traditionally, local authority managers had worked their way up from case workers to managerial levels and the grounding in the technical knowledge of administering housing benefit had formed the basis of career progression. In contrast, in TCS this skill was no longer a prerequisite for career success. Opportunities arose for those who displayed the 'right' attitude and characteristics such as a flexible approach, showing initiative, a customer focus and taking personal responsibility for performance were all valued.

'Certainly within TCS if you show any initiative and interest you are allowed to go with it. You are not pigeonholed by any means. If you show an interest in an area you are allowed to let that develop and of course your job develops beyond.' (TCS (L) Manager 4, female)

A certain amount of 'entrepreneurialism' was prized and got individuals noticed and picked out for development opportunities. The case worker below contrasts the

'worker bee' approach valued in the local authority to the 'enterprising self' she had become in TCS;

'I've always imagined myself as worker bee. Having said that I did something totally out of character, I tried to devise a part of the system that would make our work a little bit easier. I went to night school as I was trying to get a bit more into computers, TCS have taken it on board and it is now an icon on the system. When we had our one to ones and P&D they said if that is where I want to go they will help me get there'. (TCS (L) case worker 5, female)

The managers we spoke to reiterated the need for successful individuals to be enterprising and 'own' their performance and contrasted this with the lack of 'enterprise' needed when working for the local authority;

'More individually, the ownership for their own performance and they need to take responsibility of that. I suppose you could argue that probably in the local authority you had more opportunities to pass the buck, and not have ownership for your own work and responsibilities. Whereas within TCS you're more likely to be more responsible for your own workload' (TCS (L) Manager, 6, male)

The group that embraced this new culture valued the increased employability they were gaining from TCS as they now felt prepared for opportunities elsewhere in the private sector. Members of this group had become responsible for their own careers and were grateful for the opportunities TCS had given them. However, the most successful were always thinking ahead about developing their own skills and their employability.

A similar situation arose in the PFI case where some individuals recognised that there were advantages to be gained from moving to the new firm, largely because more supervisory positions had been created so creating an escape route out of their current roles. The externalization of services led to an increased emphasis on paperwork as part of contract monitoring, and more staff were needed to lead teams in order to cope with increased demand. One of the porters had moved into a

position of training officer with the new company, and he spoke with great satisfaction about the increased availability of training since the takeover. He said:

'The Trust never even bothered about us but the Hotel Services Company is actually starting to bother about us and it's brilliant.' (PFI Hotel Services Company, porter 4, male)

Being part of a larger and more geographically dispersed organization also brought potential opportunities to transfer to other parts of the company elsewhere. For some this represented a problem in that they might feel pressurized to take jobs elsewhere in order to progress their careers whereas for others this was perceived as an opportunity to broaden their knowledge and experience. This illustrates well the point made earlier about moving beyond the simple dichotomy of winners and losers.

In the teacher supply case, this theme of opportunism also arose for those who were able to take advantage of the triangular relationship between schools, the agency and themselves. Some of these teachers had entered supply teaching as a temporary measure but had now stopped looking for permanent work directly as a result of the relationship they had forged with the agency. For these teachers, the agency had offered a contract that guaranteed the supply teachers five days work a week. This meant when schools needed a teacher, these teachers were contacted first. This privileged position of freedom and security was a direct result of some teachers being very effective at forging relationships with the agency consultants. Teachers admitted that they would drop into the agency 'just for a chat' with the aim of ensuring the agency consultants would remember them and like them enough to offer them the work when schools made contact. These teachers identified with the agency rather than the school. The teachers who did not build up these relationships with the agency consultants found that their work was often 'patchy'. In this context again it was more personal characteristics that determined success rather than subject fit for example.

However, even those who did have a contract arrangement had to take responsibility for building up their own work if they were to make the most of the money on offer in term time;

'I will generally work on first come first serve basis but if I have not got something I will ring Teachertemp first and ask what they have got for me for the next two or three weeks and fill some gaps up in my diary. Then say it is Thursday and next week I have got Tuesday and Wednesday booked but nothing else I will ring TeacherTemp and if they have nothing I will ring the others and fill in the gaps. If TeacherTemp ring up again with something I say have just booked up with other agencies so I am not available for these days'.  
(TeacherTemp, supply teacher 15, male)

However, although these teachers were opportunistic it remains unclear as to whether they were 'winners', to use the language often used in these debates. It is important to note that the 'entrepreneurial' skills developed as a supply teacher were not enhancing their employability and the long term careers of these teachers were precarious because of the lack of professional development available from both the school and the agency. Excessive amounts of short-term supply teaching in non-specialist subjects areas meant the majority of them were out of touch with educational changes (unless they had received in-school training when on long term supply). This is a direct consequence of shifting responsibility for careers onto the individual, something which typically results from these triangular relationships. While it did not make sense for the school to invest in skills that the supply teacher would inevitably take elsewhere, nevertheless the agency also failed to provide training as it was recognized that most teachers were signed up with a number of agencies, so their 'investment' may be lost. Thus, while this group enjoyed supply teaching and were taking advantage of teacher shortages, their long term career prospects remained uncertain. Neither the school nor the agency were responsible for providing the resources teachers needed to keep them up to date and thus if the external labour market were to change, career opportunities were likely to be severely curtailed.

It is also important to note that some teachers took the opportunity of supply teaching to defer decisions about their future career. This 'temporary boundarylessness' can be understood in the context of teacher shortages at the time of the study. This meant that these teachers had the luxury of remaining non-committal about their

future direction while still earning a good wage pushed up by the teacher shortages, as the following quote illustrates;

'I suppose part of the thing about being a supply teacher is that I'm not particularly career orientated, not as far as teaching goes. I've got no ambition to be a head. If that was my aim I wouldn't be doing this. I've basically used my teaching to help me travel'. (TeacherTemp, supply teacher 20, female)

Thus, these could also be classed as 'opportunists', capitalizing on the rise of agencies and teacher shortages to take the opportunity to stall on any career plans and use the time to decide whether or not they wanted a career in teaching.

### 3. Boundary spanning agents

The final group identified in our research is 'boundary spanning agents' (Marchington et al, 2005). These were evident in all three cases: the consultants from the agency and the senior teachers from the schools who spent time liaising with one another to get supply teachers in post, often at short notice; the managers from TCS and from the local authority who spent a large amount of their time overseeing the contract, ensuring that targets were met and penalties were imposed, as well as discussing ways in which to improve workflow; and those employed by the SPV in the PFI case, plus the managers on both sides of the contract who were responsible for ensuring patient services were provided to an acceptable and agreed standard. This was the group that neither clung to the status quo nor wholeheartedly shed their past knowledge and values, but rather brought new expertise to the management of contracts. As indicated in the literature review, this required the use of entrepreneurial skills, technical and tacit knowledge in order to build sustainable relationships between the partners through a mixture of persuasion, influence, negotiation and power. These roles were interesting precisely because they were explicitly focused on inter-organizational relationships, thus providing a potentially new career route for managers who offered skills and experience to more than one organization, and who were good at managing the contracts successfully.

In both the housing benefit and health care case studies, senior managers argued it was their past working experience in the public sector that enabled them to make the partnerships a success. While a public sector approach was deemed 'inflexible' in these situations, nevertheless we found that an understanding of the public sector became essential for smoothing over inter-organizational relationships and paradoxically became the key ingredient of success for the senior managers in the PPPs. Ex-public sector managers used the tacit knowledge and relationships they had built up in the public sector to undertake their roles and secure the success of the partnerships. Individual careers and organizational relationships were very much tied in this sense.

In the housing benefit case, TCS had initially appointed managers who had worked elsewhere within the company and displayed evidence that they knew how to manage customer service operations. They came with no experience of housing benefits, and to some extent this caused problems, largely because they were unaware of the legal and technical aspects of this service, and took decisions which might well have worked in a call centre situation but which were deemed inappropriate in the more highly charged 'political' arena of benefits provision. Accordingly, TCS specifically went out to recruit an ex-public sector manager who had undertaken a similar role from the local authority side of the contract in another London borough. Given that he was technically aware and had knowledge of dealing with politicians, he brought with him skills that were in short supply. Added to that, he had considerable entrepreneurial talent, and he used that to try and influence the triangular relationship between TCS, the local authority and the agency that supplied some of the workforce (see Marchington et al, 2003 for further analysis of this case). He put a lot of emphasis on his interpersonal relations:

'What we are doing is building trust...It's about being honest and not trying to hide anything in terms of the services delivered. So, we put our hands up and say if service delivery is weak. I think it's a true partnership now. We work very, very well together (with the local authority)' (TCS-L, General Manager, male)

The manager running the contract from the public sector side had also been in local government for most of his career, but he too saw opportunities for developing skills in how to manage across organizational boundaries. Not surprisingly, given that he was the client rather than the supplier in this contract, he preferred to remain focused on the tangible aspects of service delivery rather than the interpersonal skills associated with making the contract work. Nevertheless, he too recognised the ways in which his skills had been developed.

In the PFI case, similar career moves also took place because the SPV and the private companies recognised the need for managers with specialist knowledge of how the NHS operated as well as close links with senior staff who still worked there. For example, the Hotel Services Manager told us that ex-NHS managers were a particular asset because of ‘their site knowledge and general experience in dealing with the Trust. They know how to mobilize key personnel to get things done and bypass problems.’ Another managers who now worked for the private sector side of the PFI also argued that his NHS experience at this site helped him with the boundary spanning aspects of his role:

‘I have an understanding and sympathy and an empathy for the staff because it is a very traumatic time for them. I haven’t forgotten my roots working for government.’ (Estates Company Manager 1, male)

The General Manager of the SPV, the organization set up to manage the whole contract, emphasized how close communications and informal relations were crucial in making the project work and provide high levels of patient care. It was deemed impossible to set out clear rules for running the contract since so much depended, in her view, on people working together, acknowledging yet not exploiting strengths and weaknesses. Such a stance requires quite a different mind-set and approach on the part of both clients and contractors, as well as creating new opportunities for those managers who know how to develop these sorts of skills rather than relying on straight technical expertise.

In the teacher supply case, the majority of the consultants working in the supply agencies had been teachers and this experience increased their credibility with both

supply teachers and schools alike. The quotation below illustrates once again the value of specific knowledge and experience from working on the 'other side':

'I was a drama teacher but ...that's not gone to waste because I can understand how people, the personality clashes, when things happen at schools, and I can understand the pressures that teachers are under as well. You go into to see a client and they do respect that. They know you understand where they're coming from'. (TeacherTemp, consultant 4, female)

Brokering between parties was also evident in the Teacher Supply case. In particular head teachers we spoke with had to build up relationships with agencies to ensure that they would get the number of supply teachers they needed and also secure 'good' supply teachers, who had the relevant specialist subject and could control the classroom. It was the case that the head teachers from the better performing schools were in a particularly powerful position in comparison to those heads who were working in schools where there were behaviour and performance issues. Reputation became key here; the heads, consultants and teachers all managed the reputations of each other and had limited control over their own reputations. The following quotes illustrate well the skills that became part of the boundary spanning role, albeit with a slightly different emphasis:

'We've got this relationship whereby what we are doing is building up trust, and when they send me someone I am fairly trusting that I know what I am getting. It's another reason for expanding the agencies I deal with.' (School E, senior teacher 6, male)

'My job is to sell to the school, and also sell the schools to the teachers, so we don't generally have many teachers saying "I won't go"' (TeacherTemp, Consultant 1, female)

In other words, whilst the senior teachers in the schools who are engaged in boundary spanning relationships with the agency are acutely aware of the need to get a good quality teacher in their classrooms, the consultants are interested in getting a deal for both parties that also brings in commission to the agency.

However, this is not like spot contracting as the relationship needs to continue and there are other agencies to which both the teachers and the schools can turn. Moreover, the teachers gave feedback to agencies about the nature of the school which was then used by agency consultants to place teachers accordingly. Heads would give feedback to agencies on specific teachers and those with good reputations and relationships with consultants would be offered contracts. Those who had not performed well would either not be given work or sent to the underperforming schools. Teachertemp controlled its reputation by sending good teachers to schools but one underperforming supply teacher could mean they would lose the school's business.

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored the changing nature of careers in the context of public-private contracting and has sought to go beyond current debates that centre on boundaryless careers. Using evidence from three cases which involved outsourcing relationships between the public and private sector we have identified three scenarios that have very different implications for individual careers. The first are the 'sceptics' who remain unconvinced by the shift to new (private sector) organizational forms and are reluctant to engage with the philosophy and culture of their 'new' employer. While it is true that this group experienced movement across organizational boundaries from the public to the private sector that was beyond their control, nevertheless they did not conform to the 'victim' status that typifies many other accounts of career change in the public sector. Rather, they forged identities by defining themselves against the values and the culture of the new private sector partner; by rejecting career opportunities that arose in the new organization they were asserting a non-career identity that they believed remained 'true' to themselves. In contrast the 'opportunists' embraced the opportunities and culture that arose in the new contracting arrangements, in particular by displaying the newly prized qualities of 'enterprise'. Many of this group would appear to be cultivating new identities as well as careers that are more akin to a commercial environment. However, they remain solely responsible for their own careers and in this sense are in a precarious position if the qualities and knowledge required for career success change in the

future. A final group is the boundary spanners who used a mixture of entrepreneurial skills, technical and tacit knowledge in order to build sustainable relationships between the partners through a mixture of persuasion, influence, negotiation and power (Williams, 2002). Of course these skills have always been necessary within organizations, but they are rendered more complex and uncertain in the context of commercial contracts across organizational boundaries. Given the break-up of large firms and the privatization of public sector services, this category is likely to increase both numerically and in importance. So-called 'soft' skills – such as emotional intelligence and an ability to thrive in ambiguous situations – are key competences for this group.

These three scenarios show the importance of moving beyond a dichotomy between winners and losers, where the winners display new personal qualities such as entrepreneurialism rather than technical expertise. We have presented a more complex picture where definitions of winning and losing are not so easily sub-divided into such a simple dichotomy. For example the 'opportunists', on the surface are obvious 'winners' and yet we find some vulnerable as the responsibility for careers shifts onto individual shoulders, particularly in the Teacher Supply Case. In contrast, the 'sceptics', while reneging on career opportunities at least in the short-term, often find themselves concentrating on the aspects of work that they find most important and therefore would consider themselves as 'winners'. The boundary spanning agents are of particular interest because they marry past and present experiences and knowledge to cultivate new careers. This group illuminate the extent of both change and continuity. While there is no doubt that newer enterprising qualities and the establishment of inter-organizational relationships is pivotal to their role, so too is the past technical knowledge they have built up over years in the public sector. It is hard to say whether this is recognised at the organizational level as much of this operates at the subjective level; for example, the teachers respect for the agency consultants because of their past experience as teachers and TCS case workers respect for the General Managers' past local authority experience can smooth over the new inter-organizational relationships but the value of this remains unquantifiable. We would also argue that the 'sceptics' are key to the working of these public-private contracting arrangements as the continuation of a public service ethos lives on in such groups and can coexist with the newer values of those who are more willing to

embrace private sector cultures. This illuminates the importance of individual careers in shaping the new organizational forms that arise in such contracting arrangements. The ways individuals respond, reject and take advantage of the opportunities that arise can tell us much about the relative success or failure of these arrangements and thus the analysis of individual careers becomes central if we to understand why and how such arrangements might work in practice.

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