

Mobility Strategies and Career Outcomes: A Longitudinal Study of MBAs

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This research examines the impact of work- and non-work-related mobility on salary, promotions, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment among 671 male and female managers over a 7-year period. Results indicated that those with frequent lateral moves had significant gain in salary increases compared to those who did not move. In addition, frequent lateral moves had a negative impact on work-related attitudes, specifically overall job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Implications of these findings for career strategies and future research are discussed. © 1996 Academic Press, Inc.

The benefits for employees of flexible career patterns are well known. Employees' expectations of career mobility increase motivation, commitment, and loyalty to the organization (Goffee, 1992). However, as organizations adapt to rapid change within a highly competitive environment, a conflict between flexibility and stability has emerged. Organizations are often faced with difficult decisions between providing career patterns that facilitate organizational growth and profitability while providing opportunities for employee growth and development.

While organizations attempt to restructure career patterns of their employees, there is some evidence of a corresponding change in individual career strategies. *Fortune* magazine (Linden, 1989) described college graduates of 1989 as having their eyes on "new realities" in reference to career mobility. These graduates are described as averse to commitment to one organization, believing that corporate downsizing has made lifelong employment in any single organization a concept of the past. They approach career decisions with a "keep your options open" philosophy that involves a great deal of movement from company to company (Linden, 1989).

This tendency to follow a "keep your options open" philosophy has been

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associated with those in managerial and profession occupations. MBAs are viewed as having unrealistic expectations of future career success, a tendency toward job-hopping, and what is known as a "careerist" attitude toward their job and the organization (DePasquale & Lange, 1971; Dougherty, Dreher, & Whitely, 1993). While there is some empirical evidence to support the notion of MBAs as careerists (Chiet, 1985; Feldman & Weitz, 1991; Frakes, 1983; Gannon & Arlow, 1985), other researchers have challenged this view (Louis, 1981; Jenkins, Reizenstein, & Rogers, 1984).

In this research, we examine the impact of career strategies involving a variety of job changes known as mobility strategies (e.g., lateral transfers, changing jobs, changing companies, leaves of absence, periods of part-time work, periods of non-work) and their impact on career outcomes (salary, promotions) and work attitudes (satisfaction, commitment) across a 7-year period. We expect that the utilization of mobility strategies will have a positive effect on career outcomes, but a negative effect on work attitudes.

Feldman (1985, 1988) has described the changing career values and goals that exist among contemporary managers as a "careerist attitude." This new careerism perspective is defined as "the propensity to pursue career advancement through non-performance-based means" (Feldman & Weitz, 1991, p. 238). These non-performance-based means include career mobility tactics (e.g., lateral transfers, downward movements, changing companies) and the instrumental use of social relationships with co-workers, supervisors, or other organizational mentors.

The new careerism notion has a number of implications for an individual's attitude toward work (Feldman, 1985, 1988). Individuals with a careerist attitude may be highly sensitive to negative aspects of their job and the organizations in which they work. Careerists must justify the movement within and between organizations. By focusing on the negative aspects of one's current job and organization that may potentially block future career advancement, careerists are able to reduce dissonance associated with what may be perceived as disloyal and manipulative behavior. Consequently, a strong careerist attitude should be associated with low levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Previous research on fast tracking provides some empirical support (Morrison, White, & Van Velson, 1987) for these theoretical assumptions (Feldman & Weitz, 1991; Kovach, 1986; Thompson, Kirkham, & Dixon, 1985).

While MBAs as careerists are expected to be dissatisfied with current aspects of both their job and the organization, they are nonetheless motivated by prospects for future career advancement. As Feldman (1985, 1988) predicts, a careerist attitude should be positively associated with a strong desire for career mobility; this desire for mobility is akin to the "keep your options open" philosophy mentioned earlier. Both of these factors should lead to a desire to switch jobs and companies in an attempt to remove oneself from a perceived negative environment and thereby enhance one's own career posi-

tion. This keep-your-options-open philosophy is reinforced by the structure and content of many MBA programs that emphasize career management, networking, and career advancement (Cooper & Dowd, 1987).

Few studies have directly tested the notion of MBAs as careerist by examining the impact of mobility strategies on work attitudes and career outcomes. Feldman and Weitz (1991) developed a scale to measure overall attitudes that illustrate a careerist attitude. Their results generally support the theoretical framework proposed by the new careerism construct. A careerist attitude increased the salience of the negative aspects of work and the organization and resulted in more negative work attitudes. More specifically, a strong careerist attitude toward work was associated with low job satisfaction, low work motivation, and low organizational commitment. In addition, a careerist attitude was associated with a self-reported desire for frequent career advancement and moderately associated with a self-reported desire to change jobs. However, in terms of actual mobility, Feldman and Weitz (1991) found that a strong careerist *attitude* did not significantly predict either number of company changes or salary, although careerists did have a greater number of promotions than non-careerists.

Feldman and Weitz's (1991) findings provide only limited support for the tenants proposed by the careerism notion. While an individual's careerist attitude predicted desire for career mobility, these attitudes may not predict actual mobility or promotions.

While we expect that mobility factors will influence career outcomes, it is reasonable to expect that these effects will not be uniform for all types of managers. Some research shows that gender has an important effect on organizational experiences, career mobility, and career outcomes such as the impact of job interruptions or periods of non-work (Coleman, 1990; Olson & Frieze, 1989; Olson, Frieze & Detlefsen, 1987). The utilization of some types of mobility strategies (e.g., job interruptions) may have a negative effect on career outcomes, especially for female managers. Unfortunately, there is no existing theoretical framework that explains why (or when) the use of some mobility strategies may have negative effects for female managers. Thus, our research will explore rather than predict the impact of gender along with the use of mobility strategies on career outcomes of male and female managers.

The nature of the specific mobility strategy that is employed can have important consequences on career outcomes and work attitudes. Mobility strategies may involve movement both within and between organizations (e.g., lateral transfers, changes in company, changes in job level or position). These latter strategies may be intuitively viewed as undesirable in terms of later career advancement. However, some research has suggested that absences from the work force or periods of "leveling off" may be both preferred and beneficial for certain individuals, especially within select demographic groups (Levinson, 1986). In addition, research on part-time work indicates that women are more satisfied with part-time work than men, because such ab-

sences from or interruptions in full-time work provide flexibility for these individuals (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986; Presser, 1986).

To more clearly understand the range of the options available for MBAs, one must differentiate between *work-related* and *non-work-related* mobility strategies. Non-work-related mobility strategies are those career movements that remove the individual from the work environment (e.g., leaves, part-time or contingent work, non-work). Work-related strategies are those that retain the individual within the work environment (changes in job, changes in companies). This distinction is important because not all career advancement or mobility strategies selected by individuals may be equally effective in terms of the desired outcomes.

The present study extends the work by Feldman and Weitz (1991), by assessing six types of actual mobility behaviors (i.e., lateral transfers, changes in companies, changes in jobs for personal reasons, periods of part-time work, periods of non-work, and leaves of absence) across four outcomes (i.e., number of promotions, salary, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment). We examine the effect of these strategies over a 7-year period among a group of currently employed managers in a variety of work environments. We expect that while work-related changes (lateral transfers, changes in companies) will have a positive effect on career outcomes (number of promotions, salary), non-work-related changes (leaves of absence, part-time work, periods of non-work) will negatively impact career outcomes. Also, we expect that both work and non-work-related changes will have a negative effect on career outcomes. In terms of work attitudes, we expect that both work and non-work-related mobility will have negative effect on work attitudes (job satisfaction, organizational commitment).

METHOD

Sample

A total of 671 (507 males and 164 females) MBAs participated in this research. The average age of respondents was 40 years old and most were married (80%) at the time of this survey with an average of 1.6 children. The average individual earnings of participants was \$80,000 per year with average earnings for men at \$85,000 and average earnings for women at \$65,000 per year. Most participants had been working for at number of years since their MBA and the total years of work experience ranged from 3 to 32 years with an average of 5 years of work experience. Individuals who participated in this research averaged about 1 lateral move, 1 company change and 7 months of part-time or unemployment during the 7-year period examined.

Procedure

The authors conducted a longitudinal study of individuals who received the degree of Master of Business Administration during the period 1973 to

1982 from the University of Pittsburgh. In the spring of 1984, an initial questionnaire was sent to 2041 graduates of the three MBA programs (full-time, part-time, and executive) at the university. After two follow-up mailings, we received 1433 questionnaires, yielding a response rates of 70% for that initial survey. For the present study, the authors sent a follow-up questionnaire in 1991 to 1301 of the MBAs who had responded to the 1984 survey.

We were unable to send questionnaires to 132 of the MBAs in the earlier survey because of bad addresses and because two were deceased. After two follow-ups, 967 usable questionnaires were returned, giving us a 74% response rate from those who answered the first survey.

Using three categories (responded, no response or bad address) the authors applied a χ^2 test to determine whether respondents to the second survey were representative of respondents to the first survey. There were no significant differences in responses by sex ($\chi^2(1) = 3.24, p > .19$) or by whether or not the MBA was working in 1984 ($\chi^2(1) = 1.68, p > .43$), but there was a significant difference by MBA program ($\chi^2(2) = 15.20, p < .004$).

Instrument

Both questionnaires asked a number of questions, several were common across both surveys. The overall work status variables (e.g., employment status, hours worked, title, position, and industry) were repeated in both the 1984 and 1991 surveys. On both the 1984 and 1991 surveys, respondents were asked if they were employed full-time at the time of the survey. This item was used as the basis for inclusion in the final sample. All analyses were based on a total of 671 MBAs who were employed full-time (35 h or more per week) at the time of both the 1984 and 1991 surveys. Self-employed individuals, who were working full-time were not included in any of our analyses. Individuals were asked to provide their her annual salary (including bonuses) in both the 1984 and 1991 surveys, and the change in salary was calculated and used in all subsequent analyses.

Measures of work attitudes (organizational commitment, job satisfaction) and two measures of career mobility were included only in the 1991 survey.

Career mobility. Respondents were asked to indicate the number of promotions, lateral transfers, job changes for personal reasons, and number of different employers over the 1984 to 1991 time period. MBAs were also asked to indicate the number of months they were unemployed, worked part-time or took a leave of absence for personal reasons during this 7-year period.

Organizational commitment. Each participant was asked to complete the 15-item Porter and Smith (1970) measure of organizational commitment and the INDSALES measure of overall job satisfaction (Comer, Machleit, & Lagace, 1989). This scale consists of statements regarding attitudes toward the individual's current organization. Sample items include, "I really care about the fate of this company;" "I am proud to tell others I am part of this company; and "I feel very little loyalty to this company." This widely used

scale (Chartrand & Camp, 1991; Steers, 1977) measures respondents' level of attachment an individual has to their company. In most cases, the higher the value of the response, the more positive the MBA was towards his or her organization. In the cases where a high value meant a less favorable response, the response were reversed scored. Thus, the higher the average scores, the more attachment or commitment the MBAs felt to their current company. The α obtained in this study for the measure of organizational commitment was .90.

Job satisfaction. The INDSALES measure of overall job satisfaction (Comer et al., 1989) examines overall satisfaction with one's current job as well as satisfaction based on five standard dimensions of satisfaction (pay, co-workers, supervision, the work itself, promotions). The complete scale contains 24 items that assess several dimensions involved with job satisfaction. We included only the six questions that comprise the overall satisfaction with work subscale with higher scores indicate greater satisfaction with the specific aspect of one's job. Respondents were asked to respond to these questions while focusing on their current job or place of employment as of the 1991 survey. The α obtained for the current sample on this measure of job satisfaction was .91.

Measures

The six career mobility variables were measured as follows. Lateral moves, company changes, and job changes for personal reasons were measured by summing the number of such incidents over the seven year period of 1984 to 1991. Since leaves were relatively infrequent and usually only one such incidence incurred, we created a dichotomous variable with 1 = the MBA has one or more personal leaves during the study period and 0 = no leaves occurred. Dichotomous variable were similarly constructed for part-time work and for unemployment measures. These six job change variables are used as the predictor variables in all subsequent analyses. Promotions were measured by summing the number of reported promotions.

RESULTS

The correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 1.

Four forced-entry multiple regression analyses were preformed in which a dependent variables were number of promotions over the last 7 years, the percentage increase in the 1991 salary over the 1984 salary, job satisfaction and organizational commitment see Table 1). In each analysis, overall years of full-time work experience, years in the current job, and age and gender of respondent were entered first as control variables. Then the mobility variables (lateral transfers, company changes, personal leaves, part-time work, unemployment, job changes) were entered in a single second step.

Older workers had fewer promotions. Women had significantly less change in salary, job satisfaction, and commitment. After entering the control vari-

TABLE 1
Correlations among Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Years of work experience	—											
2. Age	.39**	—										
3. Lateral transfers	.05	-.03	—									
4. Company changes	-.12**	-.13**	-.12**	—								
5. Leaves of absence	-.07	-.14**	.01	.10*	—							
6. Parttime work	-.05	-.01	-.02	.07	.09*	—						
7. Unemployment	.01	-.01	-.05	.16**	-.02	.00	—					
8. Job changes	-.10**	-.06	.02	.44**	.07	.07	.03	—				
9. Promotions	-.17**	-.32**	.12**	.03	.03	-.05	-.06	.03	—			
10. Change salary	.07	-.04	-.10*	.04	-.05	-.07	.06	-.02	.08*	—		
11. Job satisfaction	.09	.00	-.09*	-.02	-.04	-.08*	.00	.03	.16**	.22**	—	
12. Organizational commitment	.07	.05	-.11**	-.02	-.06	-.06	.03	.02	.03	.25**	.71**	—
13. Years in current job	.24**	.31**	.20**	-.65**	-.13**	-.00	-.14**	-.29**	-.08*	-.07	-.02	-.02

Note. $N = 671$. Leaves of absences are coded 1 = any absences, 0 = no absences.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 2
Results from Regression Analysis

Step	Promotions	Change Salary	Job Satisfaction	Organizational Commitment
One				
Years full-time	-.020	1.314*	.162	.120
Years in current job	.005	-.539	-.041	-.053
Age	-.077**	-.580	-.046	.023
Gender	.038	-12.36**	-1.553**	-2.169***
Step One R^2	.11	.03	.03	.03
Adjusted R^2	.10	.02	.02	.02
F value	19.89***	4.54**	4.46**	4.06**
Two				
Lateral moves	.120	-3.399*	-.443	-.599*
Company changes	.012	1.271	-.565	-.829*
Personal leaves	-.009	-.890	-.033	.091
Part-time work	-.013	-.522	-.066	-.064
Unemployment	-.021	-.967	.003	.073
Job changes	-.020	-2.442	.793	.920
Step Two R^2	.12	.04	.05	.04
Adjusted R^2	.11	.03	.03	.03
F value	9.23	3.05***	3.19***	3.03***
Adjusted R^2 Change	.01	.01	.01	.01
F for change	1.99	2.03	2.31*	2.31*

$p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

ables, the mobility variables failed to account for significant increase in R^2 for promotions or salary change, but did contribute significantly to predicting job satisfaction and organizational commitment (see Table 2). Number of lateral moves has a negative effect on change in salary, job satisfaction and organizational commitment and was the only mobility variable that significantly predicted overall promotions, salary change and satisfaction after entering the control variables (see Table 2). Both lateral moves and company changes predicted commitment. Thus, as expected, mobility produced a negative impact on the overall work-related attitudes among the managers in our sample.

DISCUSSION

The basic question addressed in this research is whether the use of mobility tactics has a positive or a negative effect on career outcomes and work-related attitudes. Our findings indicate that frequent lateral moves did positively predict frequency of promotions, but had a negative affect on overall change in salary. Regression results can be interpreted as indicating that those with frequent lateral moves had more than \$3000 gain in salary increases compared to those who did not move. Results also showed women getting smaller salary

changes amounting to about \$1,200. Older workers had fewer promotions. In addition, frequent lateral moves had a negative affect on work-related attitudes, specifically overall job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Our findings can be viewed as an attempt to address a more fundamental issue concerning the overall affect of job changes on career outcomes. The debate centers around two central ideas. Levinson (1986) suggests that stability and continuity of work is a necessary and healthy part of adult career development. Some argue that too much change interferes with the acquisition of skills and knowledge and impairs career success. Levinson's notion suggests that job stability (rather than mobility) should be positively related to overall career success and work attitudes. Brett (1984) found some support for this idea in that career transitions produced high levels of uncertainty that, in turn, created stress. Individuals undergoing these job changes were less likely to use active coping strategies to reduce this stress and were more afraid of asking for help during the transitions.

However, the notions of using mobility strategies and of a careerist attitude (Feldman & Weitz, 1991) suggest that lack of job stability or job changes may not be as detrimental as Levinson argues. As organizational structure becomes less hierarchical (Schein, 1978), movement within one organization or between organizations may become more desirable in terms of overall success. Increasingly, managers may be given more responsibility and experience, without a significant change in job title or salary (Hall & Rabinowitz, 1988). This enhances the desire for job changes as a way of eventually increasing the frequency of promotions and increasing one's salary. Thus, the central question remains whether job stability has a positive or a negative affect on overall career success and work-related attitudes. Thus, criticisms of MBAs may be inappropriate given what may be a reasonable and somewhat effective career strategy in a rapidly changing and uncertain work environment.

Our results provide support for both perspectives. In terms of work-related attitudes, frequent job changes (consistent with careerist strategies) resulted in negative attitudes toward one's job and the organization. In addition, frequent lateral movement within the organization had a positive affect on number of promotions but a negative affect on overall change in salary, at least during this initial seven-year period. It is difficult to judge from these data whether these lateral moves may eventually yield a high return on change in salary overall a longer period of time. It may be the case that initial lateral moves which yield positive effect in terms of title or position within the organizational (viewed as a "promotion") take place as an individual attempts to redirect his career or develop expertise in different functional areas. These types of lateral moves may produce the paradoxical result observed here of positively affecting promotions while negatively impacting overall salary. If these speculations are valid, then a follow-up study of these participant later may demonstrate that these initial lateral moves, which negatively affect

salary, may have had beneficial effects on individual earnings that require additional time to become apparent. Thus, the answer to whether job changes have a positive versus a negative affect on career outcomes is quite criterion-dependent; that is, these career outcomes appear to be positive if the criteria is frequency of promotion, but are negative if the criterion is work-attitudes, or short-term change in salary.

Future research might examine other measures of career success beyond traditional measures such as salary, promotions and work attitudes (satisfaction and commitment). Given the affect of corporate downsizing, the use of lateral moves may be the promotions of the future (Linden, 1992). Several organizations have begun to encourage lateral moves because they see relatively few promotions ahead for their employees. In addition, lateral transfers may lead to other positive career outcomes such as responsibility, autonomy, flexibility, and skill diversity. This suggests that not only should the affect of emerging career patterns be examined within the context of career changes in general, but that our criterion for determining successful outcomes for careerist and non-careerist should be examined more extensively as well. In addition, some attention to the potential costs of this type of mobility strategy is needed.

Given that employee expectations of career mobility has an important affect on motivation, commitment and loyalty to the organization (Goffee, 1992), there are several practical implications of our findings. While the benefits for employees of flexible career patterns are well established, the most effective way for individuals and organizations to manage these flexible structures are not as well known. According to the careerist notion, individuals attempt to use career mobility to increase positive career outcomes such as salary and promotions. Our findings suggest that while these types of strategies may positively affect some career outcomes (promotions), they may have a detrimental affect on short-term salary and overall work-related attitudes (satisfaction and commitment). Thus, it is critical for organizations to be aware that as they provide flexible career patterns for individuals, this flexibility may result in decreasing an individual's overall satisfaction with his or her job and with the organization. In addition, individuals who place a high value on salary as an index of career success may be more dissatisfied with their job and the organization than individuals who place more value on career outcomes such as promotions, autonomy and job status. Thus, opportunities that provide flexibility for the individual and the organization may, in fact, have negative rather than positive long-term effects for the individual and the organization.

One contribution of this work is the tracking of career mobility over the 7-year period examined in this study. The use of a longitudinal design to examine career outcomes is useful and important methodological approach for examining the affect of early career choices on later career outcomes. However, our study examines these changes over a somewhat brief 7-year

period. Feldman and Weitz (1991) assert that individuals may become less careerist in middle to late-career stages because of the consequences on perceived competence. This may occur because frequent job mobility may be interpreted as a indicator of low career commitment or poor job performance for older workers. In addition, mobility may come at greater costs in terms of family life and may be less available for older compared to younger employees. Thus, using mobility strategies may have a negative affect as individuals advance in age or career stage. The managers in our study were all relatively early in their career stages, thus the affect of utilizing these mobility strategies for later career development and outcomes could not be examined. Another follow-up study of these individuals as they enter later career stages to examine the affect of these same mobility variables on subsequent promotions, salary increases and overall work attitudes would be an important contribution to future work in this area.

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