

## How can Developmental theories help clarify career transitions for Clients?

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### Overview

Career transition and work/life balance can be a complex process for many individuals (Lewis 2003). Transitions often involve far more than the client's work or role and often involve their sense of self, self esteem, values and individual factors that will influence their decision making process (Peterson 1996).

Career developmental theories provide the stepping stones to enhance the clients understanding of their situation and the challenges they may be facing. The Minnesota Theory of Work Adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist 1984) is particularly useful in understanding the dynamic process of the person-environment fit. This fit takes into account the persons interests, values, goals and whether or not these are reinforced (or matched) with their working environment. The theory states that if there is a good match between the two, this will give rise to personal satisfaction and ultimately ongoing tenure with the organisation (Hesketh & Dawis, 1991). The theory is also useful as it highlights how this is a *dynamic* fit – that is, both the environment and the individual will change over time and the level of “fit” will therefore also change. In a career transition process, using the framework to understand what has shifted can give rise to the solution itself.

Supers Career Stage Theory (1957) is also useful in mapping career transitions, from two levels. The theory highlights the age related and psychological shifts that individuals will make across their career – outlined in the 4 key stages of Exploration, Establishment, Maintenance and Disengagement (Peterson 1996). Mapping the client's situation to these stages can again provide a useful insight into their development. On a more detailed level, Super also described the concept of career maturity (Sharf 1997). Career maturity was described as incorporating 5 major elements. These elements can provide a practical methodology for exploring where the client stands in their specific career domain.

## Case Study Discussion

In order to understand the application of career developmental theories and work/life balance issues in career transition, it is necessary to understand the career and personal background of the client (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993).

Based on a series of case study interviews conducted, the following information was identified:

Jane (name changed for confidentiality purposes) is a highly successful Manager working in a very niche area of Business Strategy. Jane is 6 months pregnant with her second child and is looking to adjust her current working situation so that she can improve her balance between her career focus and family commitments. In addition to this, Jane identified a series of sometimes competing priorities include:

- 1) Her own admission that has very little idea of the options available to her in terms of current role and life balance, and has not spent any significant time reflecting upon or planning her preferred outcomes.
- 2) Her perception that her organisation is not supportive of her working part time once she has had the child - given the level of seniority in her role. Conversely Jane also does not feel that the role could be conducted effectively if it was part time.
- 3) She is unsure as to whether she is keen to pursue her erstwhile successful career however states that financially this would be an issue.
- 4) She is keen to spend more time with her children and cannot foresee how she can balance the two - her career transition is made all the more critical based on her assumption that being a mother and continuing her career are mutually exclusive.
- 5) She would like to remain in an intellectually challenging role (preferably the one she is in) and feels that this would compliment her time spent with her children.

Throughout the interview process it was clear that, whilst Jane had undergone some shifts in her attitude towards her work and the areas in her life that she really values, her level of awareness around these shifts was not high.

As such, in terms of a process for understanding the shift in her personal and career situation (and at the same time, normalising this for her and working through the competing priorities), the following diagrammatic example of the Minnesota Theory of Work Adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984) is useful. Items marked *in italics* refer to the potential areas of change that may have occurred for Jane (without her explicit awareness).

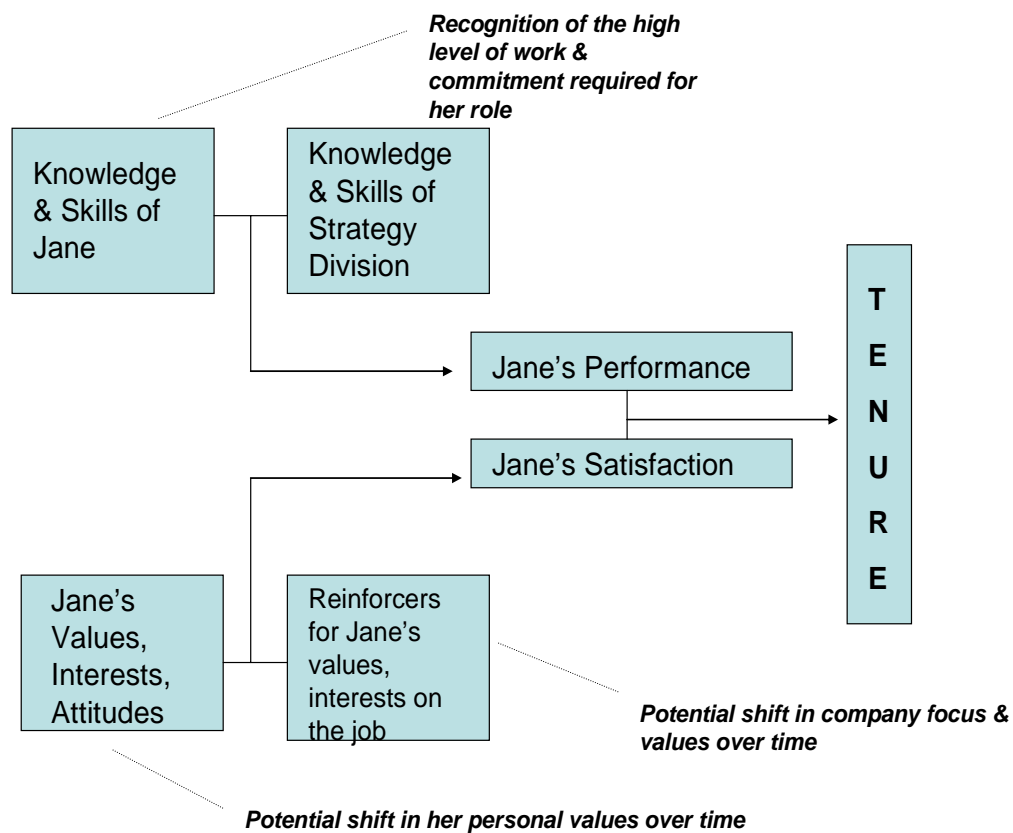


Figure 1: Adapted from a diagrammatic representation of the Minnesota Theory of Work Adjustment (Hesketh & Dawis, 1991)

Figure 1 illustrates the variable factors that can impact one's adjustment to work and therefore *one's tenure or length of stay*. These include the individual's knowledge & skills and how well this is matched to the organisational requirements for knowledge and skills in the role; the individual values and interests and how these are matched or reinforced by the organisation's values and norms and ultimately the performance and satisfaction levels which result and lead to length of stay.

In Jane's case it is highlighted in the interviews that whilst she joined the organisation over 10 years ago and was happily focused on building her career, the onset of children – particularly in the past 2 years has meant that her focus and values have shifted towards a more family/ personal life orientation. Jane has recognised that something needs to shift in the variables above in order *to lift her satisfaction and willingness to stay* with the same organisation. Alternatively her career transition may mean pursuing options outside of her current organisation (although this is not a preference).

Accordingly the Minnesota Theory Of Work Adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984) can be used to identify the changes that have taken place at an individual and organisation level. Additionally, the model provides the perspective of the organisations satisfaction with Janet – termed “satisfactoriness” (Sharf 1997) – such that her choices not only need to fit with her own developed values and needs but also within the organisational context, in order for her transition to be successful.

An additional perspective in understanding Jane's options in her current situation, is the testing of her personality, values, motivational needs and career interests - all of which are integral to the Minnesota Theory Of Work Adjustment (Hesketh & Allworth 1991). Testing of Jane's interests is helpful in making her options more explicit and increasing the likelihood that she will make a satisfactory choice (Hansen 1994). Testing can also involve Job competencies, work analysis, organisational rewards and reinforcers as these will all either add to or subtract from her analysis of whether the organisational “fit” will meet her current needs (Hesketh & Allworth, 1991).

In any career transition process, one of the fundamental goals for Jane is to increase her level of fit within her organisation – once she has understood all of the variables outlined above. In this way, Jane could attempt this adjustment by adopting various adjustment styles : flexibility; activeness; reactivity and perseverance. Thereby either reactively changing herself or actively changing the environment. Some options for change are considered in Figure 2:

|   | <b>Individual Initiates Change in themselves (reactive)</b>  | <b>Individual initiates change in the Environment (active)</b>                                     |
|---|--|--|
| <b>Individual is Target for Change</b>  | Jane may alter her own behaviour eg. Minimises cognitive focus on the impact on family and emphasises her career | Jane may take part in time management training to facilitate more productivity & less time at work |
| <b>Environment is Target for Change</b> | Jane may proactively negotiate with her company to work part-time  | Jane may consider changing jobs entirely and removing herself from the environment                 |

Figure 2: Adapted from a Schema for classifying actions as active or reactive from the perspective of individuals or the environment (Hesketh & Dawis 1991)

This approach to Jane’s career transition provides the foundation for building her *strategic plan* moving forward (Auerbach 2001).

Another Developmental theory - the Career Stage Theory as developed by Super (1957) - provides further insight into Janet’s situation by introducing a stage and age related framework to her thinking (Sharf 1997). Further to the focus on the individual attributes in Minnesota Theory Of Work Adjustment, Super developed the notion of stages across one’s career lifespan and how these stages impact on the development of individual values and perspectives over time (Shaf 1997).

Super (1957) theorised that individuals pass through four distinct psychological stages – Exploration, Establishment, Maintenance and Disengagement (Peterson 1996). The Establishment phase covering ages 25 to 44 is particularly relevant to Janet’s situation and is divided into the first half – finding one’s organisational & values fit; and second half – securing ones place or position in this chosen career and/or environment (Peterson 1996).

Interestingly Super postulated that it wasn’t until the mid forties that a shift in vocational attitudes and values takes place, whereby career and meaning take a less important role (Sharf 1997). Whilst Janet has not yet reached 44 (the tail end of Super’s Establishment career phase) her situation may be helped by mapping her

current thinking to the model –potentially highlighting that she has moved into the career maintenance phase a year or two early!

As part of this life stage theory, Super (1957) also described the concept of *career maturity* and its 5 components (as listed by Sharf 1997):

- 1) Orientation to vocational choice (values/ interests)
- 2) Information and planning about a preferred occupation
- 3) Consistency of vocational preference
- 4) Crystallisation of traits
- 5) The wisdom of vocation preference

These five components provide a practical means of investigating a client's level of awareness over their career choices and can facilitate another area for action within the client's strategic plan. An example includes Jane's first observation "1) Jane – by her own admission - has very little idea of the options available to her" (page 4), indicating that her career maturity in terms of information & planning is an area for focus and development.

In order to capture the client's concern with work/life balance it is useful to explore the domains and systematically deal with issues that arise (Lewis 2003). Whilst there are a number of theories relatively supported in the work/life relationship area (Peterson 1996), it is necessary to identify with the client the areas of main concern – in the interview with Jane, this being her time spent with her children. One could argue that this reflects a compensatory model of work/life (Peterson 1996) whereby Jane's needs (valuing her time with children) is reflected in her desire to change the way she is working in order to accommodate this. As such by making these concerns explicit and using the concept of integrating work and personal life commitments (Lewis 2003), the client is more able to readily make change and act from a more enlightened position.

## **Conclusion**

The developmental theories of Dawis & Lofquist (1984) and Super (1957) provide a valuable framework for dealing with career transition, whilst at the same time shedding light on work/ personal life challenges and ultimately, facilitating the

building of individual strategic plans for clients. Using these frameworks, the individual – in this case Jane - is able to establish a clearer understanding of:

- Her personal profile including more accurate self assessment of her abilities, interests, values, personality traits and relevant attributes – as a core theme of the Minnesota Theory of Work Adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984)
- Her individual career history and priorities – in the context of her own development and relative to the development of others – using the Career Stage Theory as developed by Super (1957)
- Her individual “fit” with her chosen or existing field and strategies for proactively or reactively changing these – in the context of the adjustment aspect of the Minnesota work theory (Dawis et al 1984)
- Career Planning and future opportunities available to her – utilising career maturity constructs – in the context of Super’s Career Maturity concept (Super 1957)
- Her personal development and acceptance of work and personal life priorities – by exploring their concerns for sustainable and acceptable ways of living both.

These steps form the basis for building the clients strategic plan, in a coaching context. By investigating each of the areas as outlined above, the client is guided through a process of discovery and learning, in order to facilitate a more enlightened position from which to embark upon a successful career transition process.

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