

The Blue Ocean Strategy to Career Management: A Paradigm Shift in the 21st Century

Orpha K. Ongiti, Ph.D.,

Africa Nazarene University,
Nairobi CBD Campus, Nairobi, Kenya

ABSTRACT

The concept of career management has become illusive in the knowledge-based economy of the 21st century. Seldom is the traditional strategy (Red Ocean) to career management a match of the emerging internal and external labor market opportunities. Employees have unswervingly aligned themselves with the Red Ocean strategy to career management. This approach leads to a saturated and competitive labour market. A paradigm shift in career management is necessary if employees have to remain relevant in the global labour market. The purpose of this desktop review was to critically analyse the Blue Ocean strategy to career management as compared to the Red Ocean approach. The reviewed literature is discussed in the context of Anticipatory Career Movement, Organisational Career-Management, and Career Self-Management. The paper concludes that a paradigm shift from the Red Ocean to the Blue Ocean strategy to career management is inexorable. The Blue Ocean strategy to career management advocates for uncontested market space. Consequently, having a strategic mind-set to career management is likely to enhance employees' preparedness to the emerging societal and economic global trends.

Keywords: Career, Career management, Blue Ocean, Red Ocean.

INTRODUCTION:

In an interview with Marie Forleo (2018), Renée Mauborgne, an author of *Blue Ocean Strategy* (2005) and *Blue Ocean Shift* (2017), stated: "Why are we competing when we can create...stop competing and start creating." These two statements act as hinges through which the discussion in this paper revolves. Given that global trends in the world economy of the 21st century have changed, maintaining the status quo (Red Ocean strategy) in career management is not an option. The Blue Ocean strategy to career management inevitably represents a departure from the Red Ocean (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). Careers are likely to change based on change in personal interests and the labour market demands. Therefore, holding on to the Red Ocean strategy to career management is likely to make one a spectator in the future labour market. The foregoing statement is confirmed by Kim and Mauborgne (2005), who argue that the Red Oceans represent all the known saturated market space and the industries in existence today.

There exists a distinct difference between Blue Ocean and Red Ocean strategy. The Red Ocean competes in existing market, beats the competition, exploits existing demand, makes the value-cost trade-off and aligns the whole system of a firm's activities with strategic choice of differentiation or low cost, whereas the Blue Ocean thrives in creating uncontested market space, makes the competition irrelevant, creates and captures new demand, breaks the value-cost trade-off and aligns the whole system of a firm's activities in pursuit of differentiation and low cost (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005, p. 18). Note that the Blue Oceans represent the unknown market space and all the industries not in existence today. In order to survive in this unknown market space, a paradigm shift in career management is inevitable. It is important to note that making a Blue Ocean shift is a transformational journey. This journey requires more than a clear idea and strategy to open up a new value-cost frontier (Kim & Mauborgne, 2017). Equally, anyone can make a shift and think differently. For that reason, a

Blue Ocean strategy to career management cannot be overlooked.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The Blue Ocean strategy demands that future opportunities are identified and discussed in the perspective of anticipatory career movement, organisational career management, and career self-management.

Anticipatory Career Movement:

The ‘Anticipatory Career Movement’ (ACM) in the Blue Ocean strategy compels one to plan and manage his/her career in anticipation of future opportunities. The ACM perspective is based on the current and looking forward to the future environmental trends. Kim and Mauborgne (2017), postulated that adopting the perspective of a blue ocean strategist opens one’s mind to what could be, instead of limiting it to what is. It expands one’s horizons and ensures that he/she is looking in the right direction. Therefore one is bound to ask the following questions: What knowledge and skills are needed now in preparation for the future? Can one be creative enough to invent jobs which are free from competition in future? Is one capable of inventing jobs that will be relevant in the future market? What can one do to invent such jobs? With those questions in mind, it is prudent to note that careers are not formed in a vacuum. Careers, according to the 2004 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) report, are directly affected by the wider political, social-cultural, economic, and technological environment factors. Thus, a successful Blue Ocean strategy to a career should be cognizant of the above cited factors and respond to the preceding questions.

What people want from their careers depends on where they are in their personal and working lives. Their career priorities are determined by their background, age, family situation, financial commitments, lifestyle choices, and future life plans (CIPD, 2004). In the Red Ocean strategy, some people may hope to be promoted into another job with the same employer. Conversely, the Blue Ocean strategy postulates that there are many other ways in which a career can develop. For example, moving to a new job with a different employer and taking on new or different responsibilities. Also, one can develop a career by investing in new skills or qualifications, and taking career breaks. Similarly, an organization can develop employees’ careers by reducing or increasing working hours, creating new opportunities, and employing people with the required skills. Accordingly, career management ought to be flexible and adaptable to the changing trends in the environment (Baruch, 2006) where the knowledge worker is of strategic importance and value.

Previously, based on the Red Ocean perspective, career realities were considered as linear and static. Thus, representing among others, assured employment, regular promotion, predictable job moves. In the same perspective, organisations take responsibility for managing individuals’ careers (Herriot, 1998). Paradoxically, with the preceding standpoint, there exists an acceptance of employment insecurity, unpredictable job moves, international careers, lateral movements, individual career ownership, and maintenance of employability (Herriot, 1998). Individuals becoming more self-concerned about their careers (Baruch, 2006; Wolfe, 1998), as well as globally mobile (Cappellen & Janssens, 2005) is the trend in the new world of work. This trend calls for change in career management—the Blue Ocean strategy to career management—whereby an individual, as compared to the organisation, is responsible for his/her career management.

Based on the above perspectives, it is evident that changes are likely to take place as one prepares for a career. The idea of a career is dynamic, changing, and open to a variety of influences. The Blue Ocean strategy to a career encourages people not to be stuck to a career that has become or is likely to become ‘outdated’. Instead, they are urged to choose a career that matches their professional objectives, skillsets, and interests. From the Red Ocean viewpoint, people develop their careers by accumulating and transferring job skills from one context to another. People also broaden the range of expertise they apply in each succeeding job. That notwithstanding, the Blue Ocean strategy will enable employees to develop and manage their careers by constantly seeking out innovative and challenging situations. In the present society, the idea of a career is no longer dictated by the Red Ocean framework. A contested market that lacks equity in the distribution of resources describes the Red Ocean strategy. Rather, the focus is on the Blue Ocean strategy, which is more aligned with the uncontested market that embraces equity in the distribution of resources.

Besides, CIPD (2004) affirms that career management is a dynamic process. This process requires flexibility, compromise, and continual adjustment in the face of changing organisational and individual circumstances. For that reason, an employee should manage his/her own career to fit in the dynamic global job market and the requirements thereof. Yet, the problem is not managing one’s career, but how to manage in the context of the Blue Ocean strategy. The fact that career management is a long journey necessitates the involvement and initiative of the person concerned. Though organisations may provide services and skills geared towards career

management, employees should take their initiative to purposefully move away from the Red Ocean to the Blue Ocean strategy to career management.

To manage one's career with a Blue Ocean mindset, an employee should observe the following: own the responsibility for professional and career management, avoid the blame game, focus on strengths and passions, give attention to self-awareness and self-management, know and follow personal values, and find mentors in line with career interests. To summarize, an employee should be aware of his/her current situation and make projections for the future. Keeping in mind, that managing a career, through the Blue Ocean strategy facilitates flexibility, rationality, and relevance in the emerging world market opportunities.

An effective Blue Ocean strategy to career management requires: consistency, proactivity, collaboration, and dynamism. Considering the changing organisational and individual circumstances, each party wants and expects different things from the employment relationship (CIPD, 2004). Also, employee career management is likely to lead to have more value to self and employer, find more opportunities for job mobility, have more self-confidence, and learn to handle change and crisis in future. Although the Blue Ocean strategy to career management puts more emphasis on the individual involvement, organisational and employees' career management strategies complement one another. Therefore, employees' organisational career management will be expounded in the next section.

Organisational Career-Management:

Organisational Career Management (OCM) refers to the activities undertaken by the organisation in order to plan and manage the careers of its employees (Gutteridge, Leibowitz, & Shore, 1993; Baruch, 1999; Sturges, Guest, Conway, & Mackenzie, 2002; Baruch & Budhwar, 2006). OCM includes a wide range of programs and interventions that focus on matching individual and organisational career needs. It may take the form of more or less formal activities ranging from training courses and assessment centres to mentoring and career advice (Baruch, 1999; Baruch & Peiperl, 2000). Although the Red Ocean strategy, to career management practices, focus mainly on advancing the individual through different hierarchical layers of the organisation, contemporary career systems support a wider range of employee mobility patterns. For example, horizontal movements or temporary project work (Baruch, 1999). To support this broader definition of intra-organisational mobility, OCM has come to include a variety of practices. These practices have a stronger focus on career counseling, learning, and performance feedback (Baruch, 1999, 2004; Eby, Allen, & Brinley, 2005). Essential to this contemporary view is that both Human Resource professionals and line managers are responsible for OCM (Baruch, 2004).

Though the employees' belief that organizational career management which leads to opportunities for career development is a part of the incentives, the employer owes them in return for their contributions can be supported (Cavanaugh & Noe, 1999), an employee's contribution to his/her career management is crucial. The initiative to invest personal time and energy in self-development and networking serves as an example of an employee contribution (Sturges et al., 2005). Employees, using a Blue Ocean lens for career management, would no longer wait for the employer inducements, but they would become proactive in developing a successful career by embracing a career self-management approach.

Career Self-Management:

Changes in the socioeconomic environment have intensely changed the concept of career from the old strategy (Red Ocean) to the notion of the 'new career' (based on the Blue Ocean strategy). The new career differs from the traditional notion in the sense that responsibility for managing one's career has shifted from the employer to the employee (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Stickland, 1996; Sullivan, 1999). As a result, new career concepts such as the 'boundary less career' (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) and the 'adjustable career' (Hall, 1996) have emerged. Careers of today's employees are becoming more 'boundary less' and less bounded within specific organisations (Arthur, 1994). Consequently, these career concepts emphasize the role of the individual as the primary actor in managing his or her own career and consider career self-management as a prerequisite for career success (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003; King, 2004; Seibert, Kraimer, & Crant, 2001). When analyzed critically, the aforementioned affirmations have moved away from the Red Ocean to the Blue Ocean strategy of career management.

Likewise, there is a difference between Career Self-Management (CSM) and OCM initiative which leads to career success. CSM is normally described in terms of individual independence from organisational career management and reliability on oneself (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). CSM involves the analysis of talents, capabilities, and career ambitions (Noe, 1996; Sturges et al., 2002). Individuals who engage more in career self-management, which is based on the Blue Ocean strategy, might develop a better idea of what they want to achieve during their career. Nonetheless this achievement is based on the changing environment. From that

stance, one is made to believe that CSM has an advantage over OCM.

According to King (2004), CSM incorporates a set of positioning, influence and management behavior employees engage in to affect organisational decisions. Employees who are more active in taking career self-management initiatives are likely to influence organizational decisions concerning career development. These employees might expect more from their employer in terms of career management practices set up to support their career development. These practices will allow them to increase their influence on reaching desired career outcomes. However, most of the above discussions tend to lean more towards the Red Ocean strategy than the Blue Ocean strategy. Yet, this paper advances career self-management through the Blue Ocean strategy.

The Blue Ocean strategy supports the idea of proactivity to career management. According to King (2004); Kossek, Roberts, Fisher, and Demarr (1998), and Orpen (1994), career self-management refers to the proactivity employees show with respect to managing their career. It includes activities such as collecting information about existing or possible career opportunities, searching for feedback about one's performance and competencies, and creating career opportunities through networking and actions aimed at enhancing one's visibility (King, 2004; Kossek et al., 1998; Orpen, 1994; Sturges et al., 2002, 2005). A realistic self-assessment of an individual's own talents and capabilities in view of organisational career opportunities as well as concrete actions undertaken to realize these ambitions is critical in career management (Noe, 1996; Sturges et al., 2002). These actions will enable an individual tap the uncontested market.

Individuals who engage more in CSM activities take a more proactive position towards career management. A more rewarding and successful career is one of the outcomes of proactive behaviors (Crant, 2000). Having a proactive personality as a trait has been directly linked to career success. In support of Arthur et al. (2005), employees who are high on career self-management do not passively wait for career decisions to be made about them. Instead, they increase their chances for attaining their goals; hence feel more successful in their career. Having a paradigm shift of mind regarding career management is the secret behind employees' success. Additionally, individuals from the Blue Ocean standpoint who reflect on their competencies and career motives experience more career success (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004; Kuijpers, Schyns, & Scheerens, 2006). This argument supports the position held by Crant (2000) that employees with a high level of career self-management seek opportunities that allow them to change their job scope or to make career progress towards desired positions or jobs within the organisation. However, based on the Blue Ocean strategy on widening the scope, one is likely to have a change of job scope.

CSM can not only result in more positive feelings about subjective career success, but also in career advancement. CSM increases employees' options for employment, development, and the extent to which they can negotiate job changes (Claes & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1998). A study by Seibert, Kraimer and Crant (2001), found that individuals who took more initiatives to develop their careers in an upward direction reported a more satisfying level of career progression. They realized more promotions and salary progression. Correspondingly, individuals who take more initiatives to manage their career expect more career support from their employer (Ans De Vos, Dewettinck & Buyens, 2009).

Summary of the Reviewed Literature:

The Blue Ocean strategy to career management advocates for willingness to learn and acquire new knowledge. The acquired knowledge will enable one to reinvent oneself based on the needs of the ever changing industrial environment. Furthermore, networking with people of a like mind, who can keep one updated on what is required in the industry so as to prepare for the same, is important from the Blue Ocean standpoint.

Note that a person's career journey, ambition and positive attitude will play a big role in managing his/her career. Sometimes there may be challenges in the current job. However, with the right skills, ambition, and attitude it will be easier to change one's perspective and prepare to switch to different profiles so as to fit internal and external labour market. Conversely, although the emphasis of the Blue Ocean strategy is on individual initiative, there should be joint responsibility of both the organisation and individual for career success. The notion of 'joint responsibility' for career management encompasses the idea that there should also be 'joint benefits' (Orpen, 1994).

Employees who will embrace the Blue Ocean strategy by taking more career self-managing initiatives will be less dependent organisational support for a successful career. Holding employees accountable for managing their own career should be supplemented with sufficient career support. De Vos, Dewettinck and Buyens (2009) argue that simply relying on employees' 'spontaneous' self-management initiatives without any organisational career support involves the risk that only those employees who are more focused on managing their career will actively search for organisational support and opportunities.

Despite the growing emphasis on the individual, career management also remains an important responsibility for organisations, since organisations still form the context in which career development takes place (Baruch, 1999, 2004; Eby, et al., 2005). Inasmuch as the Blue Ocean strategy supports career self-management, the two—CSM and OCM—are not mutually exclusive but are expected to complement one another (Kossek et al., 1998; Orpen, 1994; Sturges et al., 2005). Therefore, the Red Ocean strategy acts as a springboard upon which the Blue Ocean strategy to career management takes off to the future.

Yet, it should not be assumed that the Blue Ocean strategy to career management is a smooth sailing undertaking, rather it comes with myriad challenges. Meeting these challenges will become even more important as working patterns continue to evolve. In the Blue Ocean strategy to career management, the emerging societal, economic, and political issues will be addressed. Likewise, there will be more international resourcing, global collaborations, multicultural teams, and virtual working. Meanwhile, organization's project-based: technological, social-demographic, economic, and political environments continue to evolve. Individuals and organisations, both have increasing complex choices to make in the process of developing and managing careers. Doing so effectively depends significantly on open-minded discussion between employers and employees about what each side expects to give and to receive on an ongoing basis (CIPD, 2004).

CONCLUSION:

The Blue Ocean strategy to career management should be embraced, if an organisation or individual wants to remain relevant in the 21st century. To talk of the Blue Ocean approach to career management as the 'best practice' assumes that employers and individuals are aware of the Red Ocean approach and have experienced a paradigm shift of mind leading to a move away from this traditional way of career management. The workable approach depends on the future needs of both internal and external labor market and the needs of the individual, but the focus should be on the application of a Blue Ocean strategy, which entails a consistent, collaborative, and proactive approach to managing careers. I support Kim and Mauborgne's (2005) argument that, to win in the future, companies must stop competing with each other. Instead the Blue Ocean strategy is about growing demand and breaking away from the competition.

How? Kim and Mauborgne (2017), in *Blue Ocean Shift*, provide a step-by-step process on how to move from the current state of play, imagine new possibilities, and reconstruct market boundaries to open up new market space in a way that people/employees own and drive the process. This process allows ordinary people to make market-creating moves and do extraordinary things. I conclude by echoing the words of Renée Mauborgne in her interview with Marie Forleo, that: "people should stop looking into competition; instead they should look outside their competition...they should create an opportunity that they cannot find anywhere else...they should shift from what they know to new possibilities and have the confidence." Embracing the words of Mauborgne will enable people or employees to stop sailing in the Red Ocean and instead to move and start sailing in the Blue Ocean and hence to become relevant in the 21st century. I conclude by stating the words of Cory Booker, United States Senator: "We have a choice every day of our lives: Accept things as they are or take responsibility for changing them."

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