

**CAREER, SKILLS, AND PROFESSIONAL DILEMMAS –  
A FRAMEWORK FOR INFORMATION-DOCUMENTATION  
TRANSFORMATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Findings from a study of Portuguese information-documentation professionals point to a major concern: career management in an age of uncertainty and its impact on professionals' dilemmas, for both new and old generations. With the intent of learning more about this profession in different generations, the following research question guided this study: what conflicts and dilemmas exist between the new information society skills and the demands of constructing a life-long career? To address this question, the study relied on interviews with librarians who have been working since 1973. The respondents came from research libraries and public libraries. The findings from this study highlight the experiences and expectations of professionals of maintaining professional success, and show how they have faced their difficult decisions as they planned their careers. These decisions concern how to deal with career choices and to manage professional training and skills development. This analysis may contribute to understanding inter-generational discourse relating professional and personal concerns.*

**INFORMATION-DOCUMENTATION CAREERS IN AN AGE OF  
UNCERTAINTY**

The information-documentation profession (synonymous with the library/information science profession<sup>1</sup>) faces aspects of career management, skills development, and professional transformation, which result in a great number of occupational changes, skill transitions, and dilemmas in an adult life-cycle. One of the main change issues discussed within the professional community is a new agenda for professional strategic positions.<sup>2</sup> There is a need for a broader discussion about levels of competencies and concrete outcomes, strategies of professionalization across realities that emerge from labour market, academic research, and organizations' needs, recognising what unites the I-D sector as a whole. As Margaret Procter says, "the need for a common sense interpretation is vital because of the nature

of public policy *per se*, and so it seems appropriate to consider public policy more generally...Consequently, ‘opportunities for agenda-setting come and go,’ windows of opportunity open briefly and then close again.”<sup>3</sup> (p24)

The trends identified by a national study of I-D competencies in Portugal<sup>4</sup> are related to the themes of prioritization of practice and skills in work place conditions, learning conditions, professional development, and European I-D certification practices.

Two implications of these findings should be underscored:

- a) In the “Knowledge Economy”, the importance of the nature of skills underlying innovation processes, stages and contexts is highlighted with strong consequences in employment levels and demands in the labour market. Tether, Mina, Consoli, and Gagliardi<sup>5</sup> suggest different investigations which can be also applied to the I-D sector: skill compositions and innovation performance; how librarians learn to manage innovation; and job polarisation, exploring cross-sectional categories of workers over time, rather than following the careers of individual workers (an exploration of longitudinal work-history).

This was the first motivation to carry out a national study of old and new generations of I-D professionals’ transitions, giving voice to lessons on career adaptability<sup>6</sup> and I-D forms of *protean and boundaryless careers*<sup>7</sup> in Portugal

The *protean career* focuses on achieving subjective career success through self-directed vocational behaviour<sup>8</sup>. Individuals who hold protean career attitudes are intent upon using their own values to guide their career. The *boundaryless career*<sup>9</sup> focuses on crossing both objective and subjective dimensions of career at multiple levels of analysis, including organizational position, mobility, flexibility, and work environment.

- b) The analysis of professional discourse, especially in the process of constructing their professional identity through language practice, living in the tension of reconstructing professional identity under changing core skills conditions.<sup>10</sup> These discourses may express emotions and identity struggles in a context of rapid changes. We note that many adults make career choices in the midst of life and work transitions. Identities are constructed within, not outside discourse and it is necessary to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites with specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies<sup>11</sup>. In fact, the meanings of career and career development must be understood through the historical and cultural location of these constructions and across relationship contexts. As Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton suggest, “it is because identity is problematic – and yet so crucial to how and what one values, thinks, feels and does in all social domains, including organizations – that the dynamics of identity need to be better understood.”<sup>12</sup>(p.14). Following Giddens,<sup>13</sup> self-identity is concep-

tualised as a reflexively organized narrative that forms a complex mixture of conscious and unconscious processes of identity regulation and identity work. Of critical importance is the linking of discourse to processes of self-identity formation and reproduction within a generation. Additionally, it is recognized that groups develop a professional culture<sup>14 15</sup> that also needs to be studied together with career development.

It is clear in the literature<sup>16-18</sup> that career development can be understood as an enumeration of consecutive jobs and training, reflecting personal initiative and ways to guarantee employability though life. The concept of *employability* is used in the sense of sustainable employability: not only be able to secure a job but also to manage one's career so as to remain employable throughout life. People need to be more reliant on their own career self-management and be prepared to expect other forms of career paths, incorporating a wide range of strategies to achieve four goals<sup>19</sup>:

1. *charting the institutional landscape* – a process of intelligence-gathering whereby people acquire understanding of two aspects: opportunities in the world of work (especially concerning attributes, credentials, skills and aspects of performance) and decision makers profiles which affect careers;
2. *identifying gatekeepers* – institutional decision-makers that can affect career outcomes by their influence on current and future career steps;
3. *implementing career strategies into broad types* – influence (concerned with optimising contacts, skills and experiences) and positioning strategies (active network development to benefits of social support; choice of job move; investment in training and educational qualifications valued in labour market and finally, job content innovation linked to the enlargement of task environment)
4. *Evaluating the effectiveness of those strategies in a recursive and dynamic process*, reflecting on past experience in order to select strategies for the future. This evaluation implies a self evaluation about success and desired outcomes.

The career success theme has been studied since 1909<sup>20</sup> in a multitude of views<sup>21</sup>. In this study, we consider it as an outcome of a person's career experience

Competencies management assumes a crucial role in career success<sup>22</sup> based on six career competencies: *career-actualization-ability*, the degree to which employees are capable of realizing personal goals and values in their working career; *career reflection*, reviewing one's own desires and values; *work exploration*, orientation toward matching one's own identity and competencies to the required values in a specific work situation; *career control*, career-related planning and influencing of learning and work processes; and *networking*, setting up relevant contacts. In a *boundaryless career*, the emphasis is on inter-organizational mobility and unpredictability and also on individual (internal and external) marketability (beliefs

in one's value to his/her current employer and to other employers) and proactive personality<sup>9</sup>:

- *Knowing why*, relating to career motivation, personal meaning and identification, career expectations, and career strengths and weaknesses, allows individuals to decouple their identity with their employer and remain open to new possibilities and career experiences.
- *Knowing whom* is also important because it refers to career related-networks and contacts, including relationships with others on behalf of the organization. The result is the development of career communities with benefits for career support and personal development. Mentoring experiences<sup>23</sup> between librarians can provide access and visibility to novice members of the profession. At *Lisbon Conference on the future of learning (2008, December)*, the role of networking and learning communities in organizational contexts, including I-D, was discussed, also mentoring as a part of the development of individual skills.
- *Knowing how* is related to career relevant skills and knowledge which are accumulated over time and contribute to both the organization and the individual knowledge base. This skill is transportable across organizational boundaries and it is oriented towards continuous learning.

One framework frequently used to categorize career success is a theoretical distinction between the *objective* and *subjective career*<sup>24</sup>. Objective career is directly observable, measurable and verifiable by an impartial third party (pay, promotions and occupational status), while the subjective career is only experienced directly by the person engaged in the career and includes reactions to actual and anticipated career across a broader time frame than one's immediate job satisfaction and a wider range of outcomes (sense of identity, purpose and work-life balance).

Heslin<sup>21</sup> identified four prevalent ideas about career success:

1. Objective outcomes are adequate proxies for success; presumably even beyond the managerial and professional contexts in which most career success research has been conducted.
2. Job and career satisfaction adequately capture the breadth of dimensions upon which people react to their careers.
3. People are similar in their concern about the success they attain in the objective, compared to subjective domain.
4. People conceptualize and evaluate their career success only relating to self-referent criteria, such as their career aspirations.

This author suggests three areas for improving career success measurement: research into what employees want; research about how people in different career contexts conceptualise their career success; and the adoption of more qualitative methods.

In I-D literature, it is important to mention the work of Catherine Mathews<sup>25</sup> about becoming a chief librarian through the analysis of transition stages in an academic library leadership. This study used the model transition cycles to analyse job transition. It considered the stages of transition associated with psychological and social impacts upon the individual making the change and the organizational impacts at the micro, mezzo and macro levels within the organization: preparation stage; encounter stage; adjustment stage and stabilization stage. However, as Franklin<sup>26</sup> pointed out, in the field of career development, we have various explanatory models of adult decision-making and transitions, but none details the intra-personal mechanisms of change or offers detailed techniques to get a person into the critical action stage.

Another topic to be mentioned is the crisis in human resources in libraries (shortage of librarians, aging workforce, loss of professionals and crisis in library and information science education). One important reference in research in the I-D area is the work of Barbara Burd,<sup>27</sup> who studied work values of academic librarians and the relationships between values, job satisfaction, commitment, and intent to leave. Also, the work of Dole and Hurych<sup>28</sup> provide useful reflection about the effects of the Information Age in librarians' values, forcing professionals to re-think ethical performance.

Certainly, these topics represent useful and necessary variables to be explored in the I-D career, especially in analysing its conflicts and dilemmas.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The *Portuguese Observatory of I-D Profession* (2006- ) was a project to study I-D professionals' image and implications for the profession, following the trend expressed by Giannantonio and Hurley-Hanson.<sup>29</sup> Image norms may influence career choices in every stage of an individual's career. As these authors explain, the role of image has received limited attention from academics and it is a theme to explore because "individuals develop three separate...sets of image perceptions, each of which may shape image norms and influence career decisions ... occupational stereotypes...self-image...relationship between their own image and an organization's image."<sup>29(p319)</sup>

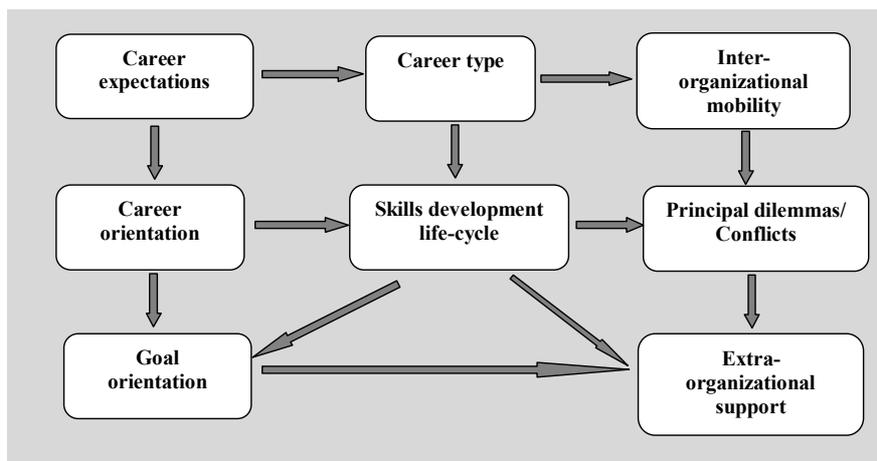
Our project used quantitative and qualitative data to study I-D professionals' self-image, but also users' perceptions. Variables like attitudes towards work, job satisfaction, job involvement and organizational commitment were studied. The first data was collected in 2005/2006<sup>4</sup> and the intention was to create a micro-laboratory of ideas to innovate strategically through national professional associations, helping novice and expert professionals to deal with strategies of readiness for change.

A follow-up study was conducted in 2007 and the results will be reported in June 2009 at the Universidad de Alcalá de Henares (Spain). With the intent of

learning more about I-D careers in different contexts from the perspective of old and new generations of professionals emphasizing the I-D skills life-cycle as an important variable to career transitions, we formulated the following research question: “*What conflicts and dilemmas exist between the new Information Society skills and the demands of constructing a life-long career?*”

Professional dilemmas are understood to be the point in one’s career at which it is necessary to make difficult choices, sometimes against existing beliefs and traditions within professional practices. The answer to dilemmas may be creative and even when people think they are merely continuing a settled tradition or practice, they could be developing, adjusting and changing it. When a professional develops new skills it is necessary to adjust beliefs and practices and sometimes this change is simultaneously an internal conflict in terms of traditional career decisions. Combining these two dimensions of research provides a new context for study of I-D career patterns.

To address this question, the study relies on interviews questioning self-directed career management forms and boundaryless forms of librarians of Portuguese public and research libraries in order to investigate career success outcomes since 1973. We interviewed ten professionals of both types of institutions, representing professionals who have generated relevant outcomes to the profession in Portugal. Four of them are chief librarians; two are now retired but still maintain links to professional arenas; four are junior librarians. The interviews lasted one hour and were guided by a semi-structured schedule; participation in the research was voluntary. Research participants ranged in age from 30 to 73 years. The chosen institutions also represent cases of institutional prestige and other cases of less importance in the sector. The framework that was used in the study is illustrated schematically in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Research framework

Questions focused mainly on six career areas: career expectations; career orientation; goal orientation; career type; inter-organizational mobility; extra-organizational support; and the relationship between these themes and strategies for maintaining balance between old and new skills in a life-cycle approach (Table 1). The transcribed interviews were analyzed using the comparative approach.<sup>30</sup>

This study followed a narrative-based approach combined with aspects of interpretative biography.<sup>31</sup> It was our intention to obtain narratives about professionals' trajectories creating four typologies by different generations (age cohorts): *professionals since 1970*; *professionals since 1980*; *professionals since 1990*; and *professionals since 2000*, using self-organizing maps<sup>32</sup> for establishing transitions moments with their particular conflicts and dilemmas. These four transition dates – 1970, 1980; 1990 and 2000 – allowed a more direct assessment of career pathways linked to marks of Information Society in Portugal, namely in Portuguese libraries. In assessing professional trajectories, we focus on Denzin,<sup>31</sup> who believes that personal stories are constructions which do not necessarily correspond to factual truth and that it is only when life transitions are retrospectively told in stories and given meaning that they really happen and transform the self.

According to Cowan,<sup>33</sup> any transition is a long term process that includes a change identified by two points of view: the actor (their human capital, their experiences) and the system. To reconstruct this process, it is necessary to have a *crossroads narrative, representing an intra-temporality – the narrative of a lived moment*<sup>34</sup> comprising what Kegan<sup>35</sup> calls the “*hidden curriculum of hidden life*,” determined by transitions due to a continual need to belong, control, master, renew, and take stock.<sup>36</sup>

**Table 1:** Interview schedule

Topics/dimensions	Questions
<b>Biographical notes</b>	Date and birth local
<b>Biographical story</b>	Family context School, training and professional trajectories
<b>Career expectations</b>	Forms of career success expected at beginning, middle and end of career
<b>Career orientation</b>	Professional anecdotal incidents, conflicts, beliefs, traditions and dilemmas Choice within profession Professional satisfaction/ dissatisfaction

Topics/dimensions	Questions
<b>Extra-organizational support</b>	Important persons/organizations and contacts
<b>Career type</b>	Protean/boundaryless forms
<b>Main professional transitions in Information Society ; inter-organizational mobility</b>	Reasons for transition; Strategies for career management Success and failures Change management
<b>Skills Cycles</b>	Main Skills (definition and time duration) Skill self-image Facilitators and barriers constraints Personal and professional impacts
<b>Life-course and the meaning of I-D profession</b>	Visions of profession and career fields

While the focus in this paper is predominantly on I-D career transitions, the on-going research reports various results that are briefly mentioned in the study findings.

**FINDINGS**

This paper reports a selection of findings from the on-going research. Table 2 synthesises these results showing its main features.

**Table 2:** Synthesis of main findings of the research

I-D Professionals generations	Transition Patterns	Professional dis-course about career dilemmas	Career orientation and Outcomes	Skills life-cycle
Professionals entering the ID profession in the 70s	Transition motivated by tasks and work conditions and career stages adjustments. Transition frequently hap-	Career planning with a strong feeling about the impact of unanticipated consequences. Success associated	Protean career Engagement in professionals issues (associations). Strong professional identity.	Traditional skills and abilities Skills confidence. Long learning cycles.

<b>I-D Professionals generations</b>	<b>Transition Patterns</b>	<b>Professional discourse about career dilemmas</b>	<b>Career orientation and Outcomes</b>	<b>Skills life-cycle</b>
	pened in a predictable order. Transition periods last about three years. Majority intend to have a later life engagement with work in libraries.	to congruence between organizational results and individual results. The role of leadership in career development is highlighted.	A mixture of great and low expectations at career beginning.	
Professionals entering the ID profession in the 80s	Transitions motivated by opportunities offered by the enlargement of the national librarianship system due to Information Society demands. Transition periods last seven years	Career planning with aspiration to promotion-pride. Success associated with opportunities to have new experiences inside or outside library and rapid promotion. The role of organizational dynamics is highlighted.	Protean career Engagement in Information Society themes. Strong professional identity. Great expectations at career beginning.	Traditional skills and ICT skills. Passive observation of the Emergence of new skills. Dependence of organizational initiative for training. Medium learning cycles
Professionals entering the ID profession in the 90s	Transitions motivated by best organizational positions=inter-organizational mobility. Transition periods last 5 years	Career management linked to continuous training. Success associated with library technological innovation/results. The role of individual's networks is highlighted.	Protean and boundaryless career Engagement in organizational mission's and values Strong professional identity. Great expectations at career beginning.	Activity interests based on specialisation areas. Importance of skills self-evaluation and anticipation of training needs. Short learning cycles.
Professionals entering the ID profession in 2000	Transitions motivated by loss of job, short-term contracts and negative career thoughts. I-D considered a transitory career.	Employability skills linked to strategies to be known in the job market- <i>prevention pride</i> . Success associated with variety of experiences in group or at individual level in a short period of time. The role of chance is highlighted.	Boundaryless career. Engagement with life-long learning strategies Weak professional identity. Low expectations at career beginning.	Variable occupations Self-efficacy and personal construction of portfolios of competences and skills for multiple contexts. Short learning cycles: series of mini-stages across functions and organizations

## DISCUSSION

We have attempted to link the societal changes in work context in the last thirty years to the conceptualisation of the information-documentation career as a changing profession. In the light of these changes, the narrative view provides precious data for examining upcoming professional scenarios. Scenarios are a starting point for exploring I-D work. Emerging themes in changing circumstances call for different kinds of actions and responses and the capacity for creative action is very important for professional groups' strategies.

The emphasis on career dilemmas is a first step towards providing a framework for empirical research that requires a holistic view about individual/organizational contexts, changes and developments. There is a need for new perspectives that focuses on developing all dimensions of professional actors within a social landscape. Old and new professional generations will actively participate in the future of the profession and will determine new actions in new contexts.

Our discussion invites analysts of the I-D profession to pay greater attention to an emergent issue – identity formation of new professionals, incorporating within their conceptual frameworks an appreciation of the dynamics of boundaryless careers. For that purpose it is important to examine their career trajectories in some detail and over time.

Where the future of the profession is concerned, research has a major part to play in the process of attracting, retaining I-D professionals and promoting their image. This can be illustrated by the results obtained for the new generation – “Professionals since 2000.” These results indicate that two factors – the image of the profession as a transitory career and a weak professional identity – influence the image and career strategies. It is for this reason that we feel these new professionals must be the foremost priority for mentoring activities. Forming new professionals is a complex process, so it is therefore important to give and to know best practices of career transitions, to save others from giving up belief in a professional future. In this respect it is important to note that much research still has to be done into the possibilities and effects of using inter-generational narratives in academic curricula.

## CONCLUSION

Returning once more to our initial research question, in regard to the dilemmas lived in transition patterns, skills transformation, and type of career, some specific conclusions may be highlighted:

- This research emphasises the role of career variables in mediating the relationship between professional generations' expectations, dilemmas and skills change. Moreover, the career dimension is revelatory of the relevance of individual variables in career success. There is no strong evidence that skill cy-

cles changed significantly for the three first cohorts. Only the new generation is capable of changing skills more quickly.

- We conclude that for these professionals significant differences do appear between cohorts due to their insights about career transitions patterns and skills management.
- This study points to important differences between professionals that had began career before the implementation of the national Information Society strategies (1997) and professionals that initiated activity in the last ten years. Combined with other factors, these have impacted differently in individual careers.
- Finally, the study has shown that there was significant change in career dilemma patterns between the four generation groups. For example, amongst mature adults, principal dilemmas were career planning with a strong feeling about the impact of unanticipated consequences. New generation choose as main dilemma employability skills linked to strategies to be known in the job market.

Older I-D professionals showed overall satisfaction with the career outcomes and orientation and displayed fewer dilemmas along their career. This implies that those involved in vocational choices are likely better able to cope with problems and have changed skills accordingly with organizational needs

Future research could continue this line of research by examining the effect that career management and skills management has on a variety of different variables within the domains of evaluation of performance and general self-efficacy and practices.

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