

The Sphinx's Riddle: Life and Career Cycles

Since Oedipus first answered the Sphinx's riddle, we have recognized that the lives of all men and women follow a similar pattern or cycle. We go through similar stages and engage in similar activities in the journey toward maturity. But exactly what *are* the stages? Would knowing them help people and organizations plan for the future? This article spells out the major theories about life and career cycles and offers insights into the potential uses (and limits) of the knowledge.

By ELMER H. BURACK

Human resource professionals have long been attracted to the concepts of career and life stages or cycles. The ideas and the models derived from them offer obvious benefits to both individuals who are attempting to plan their careers and organizations planning for succession and employee development. But there is a great deal of confusion about terminology and applications. The purpose of this article is to summarize and classify some of the major ideas and approaches so that

and career status remains ambiguous. Also, the general implications for career and organization behaviors have not been worked out, and the models remain largely untested. Still, the fact that many organizations use the models is a compelling enough reason to review their potential uses for one's own organization.

Career development

Organizational career development combines two separate but related perspectives. *Career management* is the

The *career perspective* considers the features and experiences of the organization member. The person's career or passage through the organization(s) is emphasized, and career is considered part of more general life needs and experiences.

The concepts

Career- and life-stage models, analyses and applications relate to both aspects of career development. But the frequent failure of authors to clarify the distinctions between life stages (cycles) and career stages has caused a great deal of confusion. For the purposes of this discussion, *life cycles* will be associated with psychological or social developmental tasks and total lifetime activities.

A person's life cycle is a "series of stages characterized by changing patterns of developmental tasks, career concerns, activities, values and needs, which emerge as he or she ages and passes through various age ranges" (Hall, 1973). Although many researchers, e.g., Erikson, Super, Miller and Form, Schein and Levinson, agree on the basic concept of life cycles and stages, they differ on the number and length of the stages and the developmental tasks that define them. Each researcher has emphasized a different aspect of life—the psychological, the familial or the occupational, for example.

In addition, while some life stages, such as childhood and youth, are defined by institutional roles, e.g., starting elemen-

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readers can judge the potential for application in their own organizations.

It would be best to state in the beginning that some behavioral scientists and organization professionals are skeptical of the schemes' merits and not without reason. Despite an abundance of descriptive data, the relationship between age

organization's definition and guidance of careers, with attention to the company's needs and characteristics. These may include company size, growth or decline rate, employees' age characteristics, volatility of the business, staffing patterns, legal considerations and the knowledge, skills and abilities (or deficiencies) of the organization's members. Corporate human resource planning is mindful of and sensitive to individual matters but always within the context of corporate policy, planning and strategy.

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tary school or high school, driving or voting, others are not so easily defined. And individuals will establish life-cycle patterns that are influenced by family members' cycles, socioeconomic position and the particulars of their lives. Yet the persisting stage-like pattern provides a beginning point for discussion.

Life stages and career stages

Erik Erikson has developed a life-stage approach that lists eight stages. The highlights of the scheme are shown in Table 1.

Career stages, more directly concerned with the world of work, involve work-related behaviors through which the individual seeks to define, clarify or fulfill his or her psychological makeup, needs and values. Super's vocational stages are a good example of a career-stage approach (see Table 2).

While continuing research on these models and others like them has confirmed the central idea of life and career stages, it has also revealed aspects that the models do not and must take into account. These include:

■ *Differing age and productivity correlations*—Functional work requirements must be considered in addition to the natural erosion of physical and mental capabilities. Statistically significant changes in capabilities may have little or no practical effect. Complex processes of individual compensatory adjustment must also be considered.

The field of interest may also help determine the effect of aging on productivity. In fields emphasizing abstract thought, e.g., physics or mathematics, the young often make major contributions. In other areas, such as technical product development, experience is very important, and employees may not peak until their mid-30s or late 40s. In artistic areas, major contributors are often in their 40s and 50s, and artists in their 60s frequently produce major work.

■ *Women's life-work roles*—Dual careers and the reentry of women into the work place have shattered the traditional female role. Life- and career-stage models must be adjusted to reflect the changes. If a woman has married young and raised a family, she may reenter the work world in her late 20s or early 30s. During the break, she may have pursued formal education or taken on positions of respon-

sibility in service or community groups. Thus, she may reenter the work world with advanced credentials, and her career explorations may take place much later than the basic life and career models based on men's experiences have suggested.

The advent of dual-career couples makes further recasting of notions about women's careers necessary. Women's breaks with work pursuits are now often accommodated by maternity leave and other arrangements.

■ *Individual development and stage movement*—Stage theorists often characterize stages by developmental tasks. The individual must work through the tasks of one stage in order to advance to the following stage. However, a per-

son may advance in chronological age but fail to meet the developmental criteria for life- or career-stage advancement. A 40-year-old person, for example, may never have resolved the problem of preserving personal identity while making a commitment to a relationship or institution (the task of Erikson's *young adulthood*).

This is not merely a matter of social or psychological adjustment. Recent changes in the economy and in technology have made many occupations and industries obsolete, forcing older individuals back into the career inquiries stage. In addition, clear points of demarcation between stages usually don't exist.

■ *Multiple careers*—This topic is included here because of common usage. In this

Table 1—Erikson's Life Stages

Name	Number	Age	Characteristics
Childhood	1-4	0-15 yrs.	Oral, anal, genital and latency.
Adolescence	5	16-24	Focus on ego identification often with role confusion and inability to establish an occupational identity; search for values and role models and testing of various possibilities (identity or life purpose).
Young adulthood	6	25-39	Features intimacy and involvement as the person is ready to fuse identity with others or to commit to affiliations or institutions, including a work organization. Commitment may involve major personal sacrifices or/and compromises. Personal conflict involves the implied trade-offs between the sense of identity and autonomy (gained in stage 5) with involvement and commitment.
Adulthood	7	40-64	A primary concern with establishing and guiding the next generation. The forms that this concern takes vary, depending on personal competencies and life situation. Possibilities include: creative writing and mentoring and building a business for one's children.
Maturity	8	65 and over	Satisfaction with and acceptance of one's life's pattern and activities.

Table 2--Super's Career Stages

Name	Number	Age	Characteristics
Growth	1	1-14	Emphasis on development of self-concepts through family, school and friendship experiences. Assuming greater importance towards the end of the stage is definition of interests and personal capability through social participation and reality checking.
Exploration	2	15-24	Multiple work-related events feature self-examination and occupational and role explorations. The explorations are given form by school, leisure and part-time work activities. Early in this stage (15-17 years), initial work-related choices are made by sifting through needs, interests, capacities, values and perceived opportunities. By the end of this stage, a beginning full-time job, which will serve as an initial testing ground of a life work, has been located or is focused upon.
Establishment	3	25-44	An effort to establish a permanent place in the work world, with or without early trial and job shifting. Initial choices may not work out and people may change work, employers or occupations. Toward the end of the stage, the career pattern becomes clearer and persons seek stability to gain a greater sense of personal security. For many people in many occupational pursuits, the 30s and early 40s are a highly creative period.
Maintenance	4	45-64	Emphasis on consolidating one's position or situation. There is greater emphasis on continuing along established lines than on breaking new ground.
Decline	5	65 and over	The erosion of physical and mental powers and the conclusion of one's major occupational role. The need to develop new post-work roles becomes a major challenge.

discussion, as in most career-stage models, a *career* is the total period of a person's life that is devoted to work.

Applications

Human resource professionals have shown increasing interest in the social and professional/technical processes of an individual's adaptation to organizational work. Because most careers are enacted within the framework of formal organizations, analysts have also attempted to understand how careers unfold in particular enterprises.

Recent studies suggest that realistic expectations at the beginning of work affect turnover, job satisfaction and probably performance, as well (Wanous, 1975). Understanding the culture of one's organization is important to building a realistic picture of how it works. Information on valued behaviors, the power structure and career paths for gaining experience and promotion are valuable for career development purposes.

Edgar H. Schein (1978) analyzed the effects of such information on the "career dynamics" in organizations (Table 3). Individual socialization and "rites-of-passage" theories are central to his analyses, which also depend on the ideas of realistic expectations and organization culture.

Schein's organizational career-stage model includes typical vertical or lateral career moves and structural boundaries. Because a move may also affect one's proximity to departments or units valued for mobility purposes, all ladders do not offer equal chances for promotion. Promotions are also affected by social processes and cultural considerations. Boundaries vary in their permeability, and gatekeepers may exact various tolls for passage.

Schein's approach also recognizes that some features of an individual's personality, skills and abilities are fixed (unchanging) while others can change to varying degrees. The pliable factors are influenced by socialization processes as individuals adapt to their perceptions of the situations they encounter. The individual who is new to an organization, who transfers to a new department or begins a new task may show new attitudes and values, a new sense of self and, generally, substantially different behavior patterns in response to new situations.

Table 3—Schein's Basic Career Stages in an Organization

Number	Description	Orientation, Activities and Processes
1 (a)	Aspiration	Schooling, preparation, formation of initial ideas.
(b)	Recruitment	Search, recruitment, pre-employment processing, hiring, orientation, initial exposure to rites of entry.
2	Training, indoctrination	Informal and formal training, indoctrination, exposure to socialization processes with varying degrees of acceptance by peers and other members. To the extent the person is accepted, he or she gains organizational status and encounters further rites of passage.
3	First regular assignment (new organization member)	Functional/departmental assignment with responsibility
	Substages (varying degrees in subsequent assignments)	Indoctrination into subunit's standards for personal conduct, behaviors and procedures; acceptance or rejection of person by immediate work group, associates and other business contacts. Degree of socializing and informal learning affected by acceptance of peers and associates.
	(a) Job learning and performance adequacy	Self-test of knowledge, skills and abilities relative to job needs.
	(b1) Performance sophistication and efficiency	Seeking visibility and recognition of accomplishments.
	(b2) Preparation for mobility or promotion (building critical knowledge, skills and abilities)	Response to organization as business and social unit and identification with people, unit or enterprise.
	(c) Performance peak, leveling	Recognition of job as test of one's need for personal growth and judgment of extent to which this can be attained through assignment or organization.
	(d) Potential for change and obsolescence	
	(e) Redirection (possible)	
4	Subsequent assignment(s) and substages	Potential to further legitimize status and position, achieve full acceptance. Various processes of step 3 repeated.

If person remains in the organization

5	Granting or tenure	Seen as permanent member or senior citizen.	Passage into other organization status groups.
6	Focus on retirement	Elder statesmen/senior citizen	Consider pre- and post-organization life alternatives after exit, mate's plans, economic needs and status and location desires and realities.
7	Commitment to retirement	Member without portfolio	Exit preparations, exit rites, preparations for post-company living.

*Based on Schein, E.H. (1978). *Career dynamics matching individual and organizational careers*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.

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Schein and his associates suggested the following guides and perspectives for further analyses:

- Cultural considerations, supervisory training approaches and general conditions that foster indoctrination and socialization of the new organization member.

- The supervisor as trainer, coach or mentor who facilitates early indoctrination.

- Training and socialization strategies in passage—the balance of these at various points of individual development and how they reflect situational considerations and individual needs. The experience of Schein and his associates suggests that the greatest organizational concern regarding “correct” values, attitudes and types of relationships is when individuals are given greater authority or responsibility. At that time, the individual is also likely to be more vulnerable or receptive to the “correct” ways.

- Individual innovation/creativity. Career development practitioners are concerned with increasing organizational productivity for “knowledge workers,” which often means facilitating their innovative or creative contributions. A relatively new approach to creative process views it as linked to career stage and socialization processes (Schein, 1971). Knowledge and insights about one's current job are seen as crucial to creative thought. Thus, it is more likely to occur when the employee is well into a particular assignment and is more concerned with the job than with career mobility. Creative processes become relatively more important in the latter part of a career stage or in the “tenure” stage.

Career development professionals can find a number of potentially fruitful areas of inquiry here. Studies of socialization processes, including the organization's culture and characteristic ways of doing things—behaviors, valued activities, gaining acceptance—may offer the most helpful information.

Career development, aging and productivity

Discussions of career/life stages and age raise the question of correlates with age. The general aging of the work force and the rapid growth of the 40-65 group have implications for succession policies,

management development, internal mobility, mobility between employers, employee rotation, skill transfer and retirement.

Conventional wisdom says that productivity declines with age as mental and physical capabilities decline. But creativity may increase as the employee achieves a greater depth of job experience. Traditional belief says that at a certain point in career development, perhaps in the mid or late 40s, previous gains start to erode. However, many recent works (various reports of the National Council on Aging; Sonnenfeld, 1979; Walker, 1978; Taylor, 1975) dispute these traditional assumptions.

The career stages corresponding to middle age (the mid-30s to the mid-40s) have changed greatly since the 1950s. The vast expansion of some industries, employees' growing desire to be individuals and changing social mores supportive of multiple careers have facilitated mobility among employers. Even with significant barriers in some occupational fields, job mobility for this age category has reached new highs (Sonnenfeld, 1979). Some of the movement may be caused by occupational stagnation—the blocking of career paths, a sense of finite youth and the inevitability of death or evidence of physical deterioration (Erickson, 1963), which affects job satisfaction.

If the individual is to make a successful transition to subsequent career stages, new answers to problems must be found (Vaillant, 1977); new life structures must be created (Levinson, 1978); people must (re)establish contact with self; and accurate information on aging processes must be found.

The emerging body of information on aging, career stages and productivity indicates that it is a highly individual matter. In brief, research indicates the following:

- After 50, aging effects outweigh lifestyle considerations as a cause of individual change.

- Sensory processes generally decline, especially vision.

- Physiological changes in organ functions or the immune system take place.

- Reaction time slows, and learning may be inhibited by problems with information acquisition or short-term memory.

Table 4—Career Stages and the Developing Technical-Professional Career

Stage	Name	Characteristics	Critical Activities
I	Apprenticeship	Close supervision Work assignments parts of larger projects Acceptance of direction Exercise of initiative/creativity within well-defined area Learning by observation	Adjustment to dependence Self-discipline for detail Show initiative potential Develop good relationship with mentor
II	Self-dependence	Assume responsibility for definable portion of project Relative independence Results identified with person Develop credibility, reputation Responsibility for management of one's own time and outcomes Technical depth in assignments	Demonstrate capacity for professional work and increase visibility Avoid over-specialization Develop relations with peers Rely less on mentor, supervisor Achieve competency: technical first, then administrative
III	Mentor	Affect others' careers and development Broaden technical skills Deal more with external environment Roles may include: informal mentor; idea person/small group leader; supervisor/manager	Achieve self-confidence Achieve ability to be unthreatened by success Accept responsibility for others Develop ability to cope with change and conflict Demonstrate ability to produce over long period Administrative duties may equal or exceed technical
IV	Senior Management	Assume significant organizational responsibility and direction Achieve orientation to external and internal environment Sponsor and develop promising employees Roles may include: idea innovator; internal entrepreneur; upper level manager	Outside contacts Delegation to subordinates Proactive rather than reactive Ability to cope with change Ability to use power

■ Risk taking seems likely to decrease. Yet, these realities of aging need to be weighed against other critical considerations (Sonnenfeld, 1979).

■ Consider the extent to which functional skills are affected. Statistical changes do not necessarily produce practical effects.

■ Long- and short-term memory, problem solving and decision making can all be significantly improved.

■ The apparent decrease in intelligence with aging may be negligible once age biases in testing are removed. Although speed may decrease, accuracy often increases.

■ Older personnel may be better able to judge the value of new information, though they may have less confidence in their decisions.

■ In artistic, scholarly and some technical areas, performance appears to increase generally with age and to reach a second peak in the 50s.

■ Older clerical workers are often more reliable than younger workers and equally accurate.

Clearly, situations must be viewed individually.

Career stages and individual development

Both the life- and career-stage models emphasize that preparatory changes are necessary for successful stage movement. Changes in knowledge, skills and abilities, finesse in social relationships, an understanding of the organization's ways and demonstrated potential for future work assignments are required for career-stage moves. But the relative importance of these changes varies with the organization.

Individuals who are actively engaged in one type of behavior may need quite different ones in the future.

Gene Dalton and Paul Thompson (1977) conducted an extensive study of technical and professional personnel (see Table 4) that has become the basis for much of the creative work in the area (see also Burack and Mathys, 1980). Their career model is built on four characteristic stages, each of which features a group of critical activities that must be actively demonstrated by the person before he or she can move up. The critical activities (or potentialities) for organizational mobility may be in sharp contrast to actual job behaviors or may call for in-

*Based on Dalton, G.W., Thompson, P.H., & Price, R.L. (1977). The four stages of professional careers: A new look at performance by professionals. *Organizational Dynamics*, 6; and Burack, E.H., & Mathys, N.I. (1980). *Career management in organizations: A practical human resource planning approach*. Lake Forest, Ill.: Brace-Park Press.

dividual adaptability to changing work requirements. Successful enculturation/socialization and negotiation of the rites of passage are also necessary.

These ideas that can be customized to the personnel, needs and realities of any organization, and the model can be applied to professional, technical and managerial personnel if the critical activities relevant to the organization are made an explicit part of appraisals, training and development and the individual's career experiences.

Career development programming

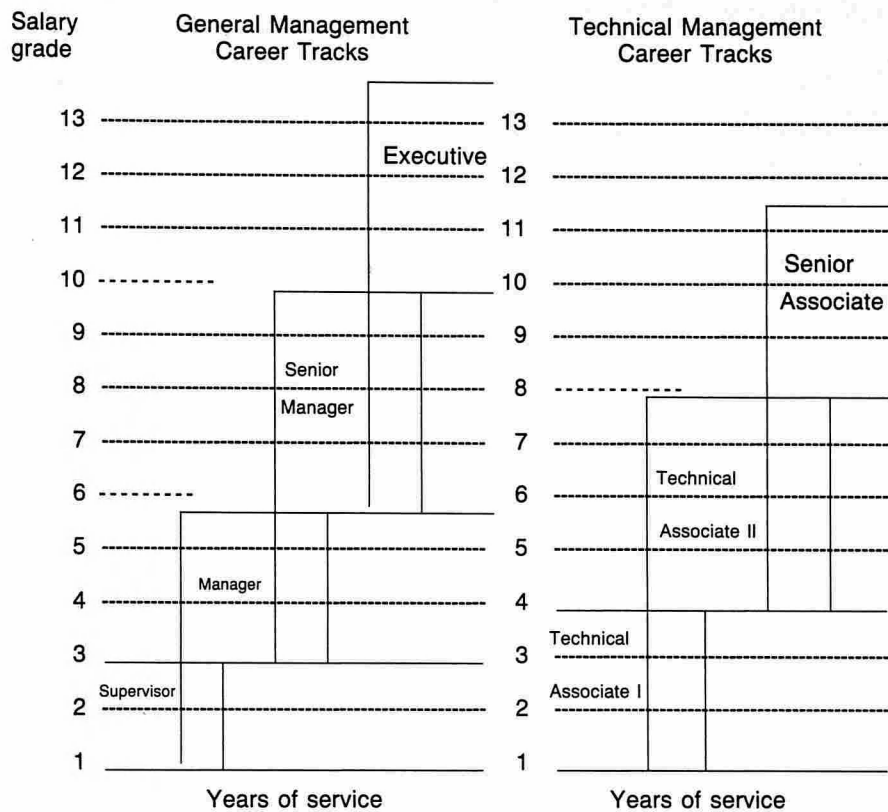
A natural derivative of the career-stage approach is a program model relating training and development experiences and stage. In other words, the company can spell out the typical informal and formal developmental experiences for each career stage (Burack and Mathys, 1980). One company uses a typical promotion pattern as the core of career planning discussions. Promotional sequences are tied to informal and formal programs and results-oriented criteria. This provides a normative model of career progress that can be further tailored to particular divisions, possible cross-divisional movements and individual situations. It is valuable for self-analysis, as well as counseling.

Dual-career model

In a number of organizations, technical personnel play a major role in work functions. They may be a significant percentage of the total work force and may be distributed throughout the organization. In computer, communications systems and technical products companies, there are often two career ladders, one for technical and one for general management.

One large company has used career-stage and individual-development approaches in combination with more conventional salary-grade information to produce an exceedingly useful dual-career program (see Figure 1). The model shows when individuals "should" show the new knowledges, skills and abilities requisite for promotion. Specific skills are incorporated into annual performance approaches, formal and informal educational programs and the relationship of supervisor and subordinate. Cross-track movement, though not illustrated, is also feasi-

Figure 1—Dual Career Track Models and Career Stages



Periods for evidence of/ or active demonstration of critical knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviors (as specified).

ble when appropriate competencies or potentials are demonstrated and staffing opportunities exist (Burack and Mathys, 1980; Burack, 1983).

Counseling and self-analysis

The life-cycle and career-model approaches provide a focus for career planning, either self-assessment or counseling. Other considerations, such as dual careers, family orientation, field of application and individual development, can affect individual situations and should be assessed. Unfortunately, early studies paid little attention to women, but this situation is being corrected rapidly, e.g., Sheehy's *Passages*, and appropriate career planning materials are being developed (Burack, Albrecht and Seidler). Hall (1976) has summarized much of the work

applicable to career stages, and Levinson and his associates (1978) have articulated a comprehensive theory based on career-stage approaches.

Levinson's theory, which has considerable scope and which is useful for counseling and personal career planning, is summarized in the following section. Although females were not included in the extensive field work that formed the basis for the study, the ideas appear to be widely applicable (*Passages* was based on this formulation).

The seasons of life

Levinson's work rests on the following ideas:

- Adults periodically are faced with developmental tasks, which are largely predictable.

Table 5—Adult Career Stages

Stage	Name	Approximate age	Highlights
1	Early adult transition	18-22	<p>Leave family. Reduce familial dependence. Peer support critical. Transitional mechanisms come into play, e.g., college, military, first job.</p>
2	Movement into adult world; structure building	23-28	<p>Attempt to establish secure position. Search or self-examination. Tentative commitments to adult roles, responsibilities and relations.</p> <p>Erect occupational and social structures. Mentoring critical. Guides for planning and future actions are provided by one's vision of future possibilities and one's desires.</p>
3	Transition	28-32	<p>Incomplete development or flaws from earlier periods recognized. Reworking or restructuring to correct shortcomings.</p> <p>Great personal instability with job and marriage changes common. Reexamination of personal and occupational attachments. Major occupational changes are not common.</p>
4	Settling down and further structuring	33-40	<p>Seek deeper relationships and commitments with family, work, organization and other valued group. Desire for greater orderliness and control of factors affecting personal and professional life.</p> <p>Attempts to (further) realize the dreams, visions and idealizations of past periods. Push to achieve career highs, become one's own person. Search for tangible signs of recognition.</p>
5	Transition	38-42	<p>Movement from young to middle adulthood stage. (Re)assessment of accomplishments and shortfalls in terms of ambitions and the future visualized in earlier stages. Confrontation with one's finite life span and realization of aging. Challenge to get in touch with one's self, start on path to self-acceptance in light of realities of accomplishments and shortfalls or inadequacies. Greater focus on the here and now.</p>
6	Initiation, middle adulthood	mid-40s	<p>Crystallizing of individuality. Greater sense of reality about what one possesses and less emphasis on competition or occupational hill climbing. Greater desire to enjoy one's own life and work.</p> <p>Further manifestations of self-acceptance and internal rather than external values.</p> <p>Assumption of mentoring job. Successful combination of attachment and concern for others with potential for improved capabilities (as the need for the latter arises).</p>

Based on Levinson, D.J., Darrow, C.H., Klein, E.B., Levinson, M.H., & McKees, B. (1978). *The seasons of a man's life*. New York: Knopf.

Recent changes in the economy and in technology have made many occupations and industries obsolete, forcing older individuals back into the career inquiries stage.

- These are the major challenges in adulthood.
 - Adulthood can be described as a series of stages in which structure for living and work are built and change as newer needs and opportunities arise.
 - A flaw is often the legacy of a past period and must be worked out.
- Levinson visualized six adult stages that had a rough correspondence with age (see Table 5). This work is so comprehensive and rich that this summary must be considered only a device for referencing the work.

Conclusion

Life and career cycles have substantial implications for individuals, as well as career development professionals. But these matters must be approached cautiously. Basic human resource research still must be conducted on many issues—female experiences, validating of developmental experiences in various stages and stage concepts. Various action research projects are also indicated, e.g., defining enterprise culture or processes of socialization.

The bibliography at the end of this article contains reference works that have proven useful to me and that may aid other researchers.

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