ISSN 1648-2603 (print)
ISSN 2029-2872 (online)

VIEŠOJI POLITIKA IR ADMINISTRAVIMAS
PUBLIC POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION
2023, T. 22, Nr. 4 / 2023, Vol. 22, No 4, p. 393–404.

A MODEL FOR AN ORGANIZATIONAL CAREER DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM APPLYING THE THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES OF COMPLEX ADAPTIVE SYSTEMS

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DOI: 10.13165/VPA-23-22-4-01

Abstract. *Complex social environments change traditional human resource management policies and practices, affecting customary interactions between organizations and employees. The aim of this article is to propose a model for an organizational career development system based on the principles of complex adaptive systems (CAS) grounded in an analysis of the issues and challenges arising for individuals and organizations in complex environments. This model can then be applied in businesses and public sector organizations. The methods of scientific literature analysis, synthesis and theoretical modeling are used in this article. Currently, it is more reasonable to understand careers and their management not purely from the organizational and structural perspectives, but as dynamic processes where employees expand their career potential in the form of knowledge, skills and behaviors through various learning experiences provided by the organization, and organizations use these intangible assets as adaptive and creative potential in a complex environment. Individuals can no longer rely on traditional principles of career development based on rationality and planning that used to work in stable environments. For individuals, it is necessary to engage in a continuous meaning-making process by enhancing working experiences and strengthening career potential, which primarily involves investing in personal career capital through learning activities. Intellectual, creative, and adaptive resources accumulated in the careers of individuals compose an important part of the human capital of organizations. This then becomes the essential source of competitive advantage, especially in knowledge-based spheres. As a result, the career development models of organizations change from traditional, stable, universal and hierarchical to*

dynamic, flexible, individualized processes that increase the career potential of employees and provide organic structures which satisfy the diversity of individual and organizational career needs.

Keywords: *career; complexity; complex adaptive systems; model.*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *karjera; kompleksišumas; kompleksiškos adaptyviosios sistemos; modelis.*

1. Introduction

The systemic nature of the postmodern world and the unpredictable and accelerating transformations brought about by it have not bypassed the career development environment, nor its participants. The contemporary careers of individuals, as well as organizational career systems, are part of a wide network of global and local political, economic, and social interactions, and possess mutual influences. Therefore, the career development environment becomes dynamic and more unpredictable (Pryor and Bright 2014; Baruch and Rousseau 2019).

This complex environment changes the traditional concepts of careers, the boundaries of career management responsibilities, development trends, and goals at the individual and organizational levels of career management. Traditional vertical career management models of organizations – based on principles of the functioning and management of social systems formed during the industrial era, such as the control, predictability, and stability of systems – are becoming irrelevant against the background of a dynamically changing labor market, the growing aspirations of individuals for self-realization, the prevailing global career space, and flat and fluid organizations. However, while the scientific discourse on individual career development considers contemporary career models quite intensively (Pryor and Bright 2014), at the organizational level of career management there is lack of a universal methodological basis which could provide a deeper understanding of the structure and nature of modern career phenomena. Thus, the appropriate tools to create an employee career development model that meets the requirements of a complex environment have not yet been provided.

Management theorists and practitioners have recently pointed out that organizations are increasingly facing complex phenomena that are difficult to explain by linear thinking models, and traditional methods for managing them are limited (Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017; Jucevičius et al. 2017; Uhl-Bien 2021). In this context, the theory of complex adaptive systems (hereinafter CAS) receives wide attention from scientists and is often regarded as the new paradigm of organizational management in the scientific discourse (Boisot and McKelvey 2010; Capra and Luisi 2014; Sapir 2019). CAS are dynamic systems characterized by non-linear relationships, capable of self-reorganizing without external control and adapting to the requirements of the environment. Because the operation of most modern phenomena and systems can be compared to CAS and these systems are particularly adaptive and resilient, it is believed that by applying CAS principles

the problems of modern organizations can be solved more successfully (Schneider and Somers 2006; Uhl-Bien and Arena 2018).

CAS principles could be successfully applied for improving public sector human resource management policies and practices. It must be emphasized that the outcomes of human resource management decisions and the implementation of policies by public governance institutions are difficult to predict and control, and rational intentions in the sphere of public sector human resource management do not always produce the desired results. In the context of their approach to complexity, civil servants are free agents making independent decisions, allowing them to adapt to the complexities of the public sector and external realities. Moreover, their careers can be influenced by constant interaction but not totally controlled – e.g., via fixed or lifetime employment opportunities. Career opportunities in the interorganizational networks comprising public and private organizations should be considered.

This article suggests that CAS theory is a suitable conceptual and methodological basis for analyzing career issues, and the application of the principles of this theory could lay the foundations for improving the processes of the career systems of organizations in a dynamically changing environment. The aim of this article is to propose a model for an organizational career development system based on the principles of complex adaptive systems (CAS). This is grounded in an analysis of the issues and challenges arising for individuals and organizations in complex environments. The article applies the methods of scientific literature analysis, synthesis, and theoretical modeling.

2. Career management in a complex environment: individual and organizational levels

The contemporary careers of individuals are affected by many processes emerging in the global market. Technological breakthroughs, digitization, and the automation of work are changing the nature of work itself (Arntz et al. 2016) and promoting structural changes in the labor market (Hirschi 2018), leading to the disappearance of long-existing professions and the emergence of new ones. This affects future career choices and creates the need for individuals to quickly learn new skills and retrain competitively. In addition, the prevailing global competition has encouraged organizations to abandon hierarchical structures and look for more efficient forms of organization, such as short-term projects, fixed-term employment contracts, or outsourced services (Baruch and Rousseau 2019). Such a situation promotes the disappearance of boundaries for individuals' careers, their expansion into different contexts, and career mobility; in other words, a boundaryless career (Arthur and Rousseau 1996), where individuals become less dependent on one employer and develop their careers within a network of different organizations (Sullivan and Arthur 2006; Arthur 2014). These changes result in a lower mutual commitment between the employee and the employer, increased the insecurity of individuals' work and careers in general, and increase the importance of lifelong learning.

Positive aspects of the impact of globalization and technology on individuals' careers should also be mentioned. The development of technology provides an opportunity for

individuals to create their own jobs, search for business partners, promote themselves and their services (Carraher 2005), or develop a personal brand. Individuals' careers are strongly influenced by social connections, which, when transferred online, provide a faster and wider opportunity to be noticed. As the virtual labor market became more and more widespread, even more opportunities for global career development opened up for individuals (Stephany et al. 2021; Roy and Shrivastava 2020). Thus, on one hand, these processes unbalance individual careers. On the other, the modern, more tightly connected world affected by digitization generates more social interactions, choices, and career opportunities. Therefore, careers become more individualized, revealing personal meanings and unique stories. The subjective criteria of career success, which measure personal career satisfaction, and less objective external standards of a successful career formed by society, such as the prestige of the profession, the speed of career progression or the salary, are becoming more important (Dai and Song 2016). As Hall (2004) noted, modern careers are determined by the individual themselves and their values, where freedom of growth and commitment to the profession, but not to the organization, are the most important, and career success is characterized by psychological aspects.

In the scientific literature on career development, it is common to draw a line between a traditional organizational career – linear, stable, developed in a large hierarchical structure and managed by a central authority – and the new one – dynamic, multidirectional and individualized (Clarke 2013). From the perspective of systems' theory, traditional organizational careers conformed to the prototype of a simple mechanical system and were therefore easily managed in traditional centralized ways. Individuals' careers were left to the initiative and needs of organizations, and employees in return received stable employment, often lasting until retirement (Baruch 2004). Typically, vertical careers were awarded to talented employees – an exceptional group of employees who, with the help of career practices implemented in the organization, climb to the highest levels of organizational management and reach career heights.

With the rising waves of globalization, competition, and the technological revolution, conventional employment relationships and the nature of career development were balanced out. Flattening, fluid organizations could no longer offer vertical career opportunities to everyone, and the emerging trend of career individualism encouraged the career mobility of individuals. Thus, the scientific literature (Clarke 2013) began to discuss the end of the organizational career era. Although traditional vertical career opportunities are currently severely limited in Western societies, this does not deny the added value created by career management processes for organizations. The importance of career development has increased in the conditions of the knowledge economy, only the aims and development trends have changed.

3. A model for an organizational career development system

According to the CAS approach, when the system encounters external complexity, the internal complexity of the system must match in – in other words, "the internal complexity must overcome the external complexity" (Boisot and McKelvey 2010). This

means that modeling the operation of the system according to CAS principles creates conditions for the system to more easily adapt to changes and survive in a complex environment. In our model (Figure 1), the individual and organizational levels of career development are distinguished. These levels of career management and their interaction are modeled according to the principles of CAS theory by distinguishing self-organization as the main process of the system, during which, under minimal external control, agents seeking conformity to changed conditions interact in various ways. The general process of self-organization consists of three dimensions: the assumptions of self-organization at the individual and organizational level; the process of self-organization; and the outcome of this process – the result of collective interaction between agents. Thus, the self-organization of agents is the cause, and the outcome of the collective interaction of agents is the result of self-organization, i.e., emergence. In the model, the result of collective interaction for the organization is adaptive, flexible, competitive human capital, and the development of career potential is considered to be the result achieved by individuals. The model also integrates other CAS elements: agents and the adaptation space that catalyzes the self-organization of agents.

From the point of view of complexity, it is impossible to predict the behavior of a system in advance because the results of the system's scale depend on many interacting elements. Due to the large number of elements, their interrelations and interactions, and sensitivity to initial conditions, CAS are characterized by non-linear dynamics, when there is no obvious cause-and-effect relationship. Therefore, in complex systems we cannot directly manage, plan, and control the process and the desired result, but it is possible to create suitable conditions that enable self-organization oriented towards the desired direction (Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017; Werder and Maedche 2018). Certain agent characteristics and context conditions promote the self-organization of agents. According to MacLean and Macintosh (2011), CAS achieve optimal conditions for self-organization when they operate outside the balance zone, i.e., between chaos and order. This feature of CAS is often called operating on the edge of chaos and effective complexity, and in organizational management it is called adaptive system response or adaptive space (Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017). In this article, the state of CAS which causes self-organization is named in the model as "adaptation space," where the optimal level of complexity of the career management system is maintained. In the adaptive space, organizations are affected by two forces: formal, bureaucratic, focused on order, results and efficiency; and entrepreneurial, promoting change (Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017). Similarly, two forces can be identified in the adaptive space of the career management systems of organizations: a rationally managed structure of employee career management, with established formal and standard procedures and rules, aiming to maintain the *status quo*; and a force promoting the renewal of the system – the external complex environment of organizations and the new needs and expectations of individuals emerging in it, which lead to the need for the transformation of the career management system. Therefore, in the adaptive space, there is a certain pressure, resistance and combination between the established order in organizations and the new career development goals created by the complex environment and the emerging career needs of employees, which require changing the

outdated system. This is a necessary process of energizing the career systems of organizations for career management systems to change and remain viable and attractive.

The following factors enabling the adaptive space of organizational career management systems are distinguished: autonomy of agents; enabling context; and the axis of the development model of the organization's career management system based on CAS principles, which is a dynamic process of learning for a career.

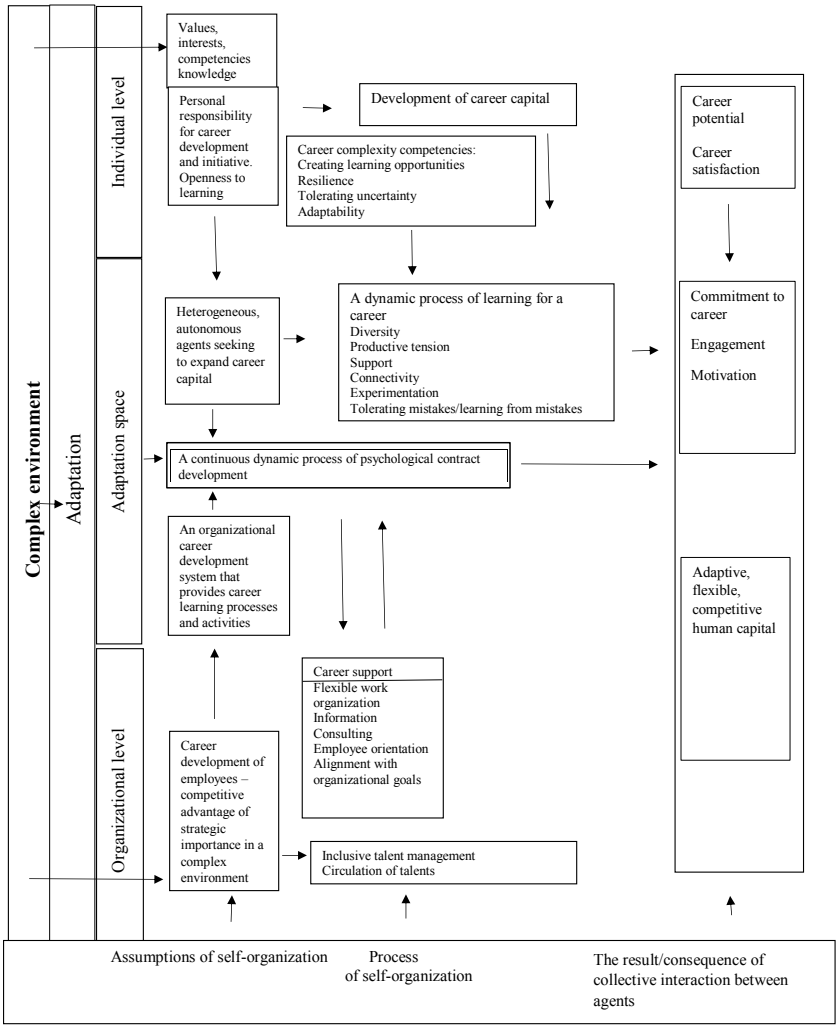

Figure 1. *The model of the organizational career development system in a complex environment*

According to CAS, learning in an organization is not the sum of learning of separate individuals, but the result of interactions between learners. Therefore, the fact that the organization has competent employees that are ready to learn does not automatically mean that the organization as a whole will have adaptive, flexible, and competitive human capital – context plays a crucial role. Taking into account the principles that enable CAS to reach the adaptive space where the most effective self-organization among agents (in this case, learning-oriented) is achieved, the following factors facilitating and enabling dynamic career learning are distinguished.

- *Diversity*. CAS agents are heterogeneous, and this characteristic is necessary for the overall adaptation and evolution of the system (Levin 2003). Agent diversity is a critical characteristic and strength of CAS that should not be suppressed in the name of efficiency in the context of organizations (McDaniel 2007). In the organization, maintaining the diversity of opinions, attitudes, and interpretations opens up the opportunity for employees to expand the boundaries of perception and to learn from each other. In this interaction of cognitive diversity, a more appropriate response to change is generated. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure a suitable environment in which employees can express their opinions and personal views, experiences, and interpretations when solving difficult situations or facing new challenging tasks.
- *Productive tension*. Support for different viewpoints and interpretations in the organization is inseparable from a certain level of tension, contradictions, and conflicts. According to CAS, learning and adaptation occur when agents, driven by common motives, begin to interact, and in this interaction, due to the heterogeneity of the agents themselves, a certain friction arises. To find innovative solutions, this friction is necessary. To create and maintain an adaptive space, it is necessary to maintain optimal tension (Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017). Too high a level of conflict causes resistance among agents and a loss of motivation to cooperate in the name of a common goal. On the other hand, the absence of conflicts means uniformity of views or suppression of contradictions, limiting the adaptive response generated by collective interactions. Thus, in the framework of CAS, learning takes place in tandem with other agents, and for it to be effective, a certain level of tension between its members is required.
- *Support*. Employees should be encouraged to express their opinions, interpretations of the situation, or conflicting points of view on the issue being resolved without fear that it will cause resentment from other co-workers. Therefore, learning – when one's views on the situation are expanded, changed, or supplemented by the perspectives of other members – requires a safe environment, which first of all starts with the support and encouragement of leaders for such a learning process to take place.
- *Connectivity*. Connectivity involves communication links between agents which develop as information is exchanged and interactive learning takes place at the individual and organizational levels. According to CAS, learning takes place in the interrelationships between agents, and the overall learning of the whole organiza-

tion depends on the collective interactions and influences of the agents, making learning a dynamic and often non-linear process. Learning in complex systems takes place during social interactions between individual agents (employees) and between an agent and a group (Yuan and McKelvey 2004). Each employee's contribution to learning depends on interactions with other members.

- *Experimentation*. Operating in a complex environment is inseparable from rapid change, uncertainty, and surprises, so organizations must learn quickly if they want to survive. Complexity changes the nature of learning, moving from learning and applying proven information to learning and acting in real-time, creatively improvising and experimenting with available resources. The most important source and method of learning becomes trial and error, which takes place in real time by reflecting on one's actions. Managers should combine formal structures with flexibility (McDaniel 2007) because innovative solutions and adaptive responses are created under minimal control when there is favorable space for employee experimentation. Managers should encourage employees to engage in a creative process of interpreting, acting, and observing situations.
- *Tolerating mistakes and learning from mistakes*. Experimentation means accepting uncertainty and associated risks (Uhl-Bien and Arena 2017). Experimentation involves acting based on available information and observing how the chosen intervention affects the situation. However, in complex systems, information can either change very quickly or there can be so much of it that the human mind is unable to process it in a short time, so the momentary decisions of individuals can often be wrong and affect the situation unexpectedly. Mistakes are a manifestation of complexity (Pryor and Bright 2012), and in most cases should be treated more as a norm than as representative of a lack of competence. Therefore, mistakes in organizations should not be seen as things to be avoided at all costs, but as things that are inevitable when it comes to discovering the most optimal adaptive response to an uncertain situation.

Conclusions

1. It is recognized that career development, for both individuals and organizations, is characterized by complexity – i.e., the large number of elements involved in the system and their unpredictable interactions make it less defined and predictable, and more dynamic. As a result, career trajectories and development directions, focal points, and management strategies are changing.
2. Individuals can no longer rely on the traditional principles of career development based on rationality and planning that used to work in a stable environment. It is recognized that today, for individuals to create a career embodying individual meanings, it is necessary to engage in a continuous process of strengthening career potential, which primarily means investing in personal career capital through learning activities. Considering the prevailing uncertainty in careers, it becomes especially important to develop those career potential resources that enable easier navigation

and prevent individuals from getting lost in a rapidly changing environment. These resources are called career complexity competencies, and include planned happenstance, adaptability, resilience, and uncertainty tolerance abilities.

3. Intellectual, creative, and adaptive resources accumulated in the careers of individuals form the human capital of organizations, which becomes the most important source of competitive advantage, especially in knowledge-based businesses. This changes the career development models of organizations from traditional, stable, universal and hierarchical to dynamic, flexible, individualized processes that increase the career potential of employees and provide organic structures which satisfy the diversity of individual and organizational career needs.
4. In the career development system model based on the principles of CAS, the dynamic process of career learning is considered to be an essential process, combining the needs of individuals for career growth and enabling organizations to develop adaptable and resilient human capital.
5. The model also emphasizes the process of continuous dynamic development of the psychological contract, which can be implemented by creating flexible mechanisms that enable the changing mutual expectations of organizations and individuals to be captured.

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ORGANIZACINĖS KARJEROS SISTEMOS VYSTYMO MODELIS TAIKANT KOMPLEKSIŠKŲ ADAPTYVIŲJŲ SISTEMŲ TEORINIUS PRINCIPUS

Anotacija. *Kompleksiška aplinka keičia tradicinę karjeros sampratą, atsakomybių ribas už karjeros valdymą, vystymo kryptis ir tikslus tiek individų, tiek organizacijų karjeros valdymo lygmenyse. Tradiciniai vertikalūs organizacijų karjeros valdymo modeliai, paremti dar industrinėje eroje susiformavusiais socialinių sistemų funkcionavimo ir valdymo principais – kontrole, sistemų nuspėjamumu ir stabilumu – tampa neaktualūs dinamiškai kintančios darbo rinkos poreikių, augančių individų savirealizacijos siekių, įsigalinčios globalios karjeros erdvės ir plokštėjančių organizacijų kontekste. Moksliniame organizaciniame karjeros valdymo diskurse stokojama visapusiško metodologinio pagrindo, leidžiančio nuodugniau suprasti šiuolaikinių karjeros reiškinių prigimtį, struktūrą ir suteikiančio tinkamus įrankius kurti darbuotojų karjeros vystymo modelį, atitinkantį kompleksiškos aplinkos reikalavimus. Šio straipsnio tikslas – išanalizavus individualios ir organizacinės karjeros vystymo lygmenų kompleksiškoje aplinkoje problemas, išgryninus aktualias jų valdymo kryptis, pasiūlyti organizacinės karjeros vystymo sistemos modelį, pagrįstą kompleksiškų adaptyviųjų sistemų teorijos principais. Straipsnyje taikomi mokslinės literatūros analizės, sintezės ir teorinio modeliavimo metodai. Tiek individų, tiek organizacijų karjeros vystymo kontekstai pasižymi kompleksiškumu. Dėl didelio sistemoje dalyvaujančių elementų skaičiaus ir nenuspėjamų jų sąveikų jis tampa mažiau apibrėžtas ir labiau dinamiškas. Dėl to kinta karjeros trajektorijos ir vystymo kryptys, taip pat valdymo strategijos. Individai nebegali pasitikėti tradiciniais, racionalumu ir planavimu pagrįstais karjerų vystymo principais, kurie veikė stabilioje aplinkoje. Pripažįstama, kad pastaruoju metu asmenims, norintiems susikurti individualias prasmes įkūnijančią karjerą, reikia įsitraukti į nuolatinį karjeros potencialo stiprinimo procesą, kuris pirmiausia reiškia investavimą į asmeninį karjeros kapitalą per mokymąsi. Atsižvelgiant į karjerose vyraujantį neapibrėžtumą itin svarbu ugdytis ir tuos karjeros potencialo resursus, kurie*

suteikia galimybių lengviau naviguoti ir nepasimesti greitai kintančioje aplinkoje. Šie individų karjerose akumuliuojami intelektiniai, kūrybiniai ir adaptaciniai resursai papildo organizacijų žmogiškąjį kapitalą, kuris tampa svarbiausiu konkurencinio pranašumo šaltiniu, ypač žiniomis grįstose srityse. Tai keičia organizacijų karjeros vystymo modelius – nuo tradicinių, stabilių, universalių ir hierarchinių link dinamiškų, lanksčių, darbuotojų karjeros potencialą auginančių procesų ir karjeros poreikių įvairovę patenkinančių individualizuotų ir organiškų struktūrų.

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