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**Managing People, Knowledge and Change**

# **Black Jack**

## **A New Perspective on Protean Career within Management Consulting**



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## Table of Contents

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Abstract.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	4
Figures and Tables.....	5
1. Introduction.....	6
1.1 Research Question.....	7
1.2 Thesis Outline.....	8
2. Literature Review.....	8
2.1 The Traditional Career.....	9
2.2 The Protean Career.....	10
2.3 The Management Consulting Career.....	14
3. Method and Methodology.....	16
3.1 Ontological and Epistemological Considerations.....	17
3.2 Research Design-A Reflexive Approach.....	18
3.3 Research Process.....	21
3.4 Evaluation of Research Design and Process.....	23
4. Analysis: Findings.....	26
4.1 The Case: Majesté.....	26
4.2 Protean versus Traditional Values.....	27
4.3 Self-Directedness.....	36
4.4 The Organisation’s Influence on Career Management.....	43
5. Analysis: Discussion.....	50
5.1 Inconsistent Values.....	50
5.2 Normative Control.....	51
5.3 Illusions of Career Control.....	52
5.4 Theoretical Contribution: Development of the New Metaphor of “Black Jack”.....	54
6. Conclusion.....	57
6.1 Main Findings.....	58
6.2 Theoretical Contribution.....	59
6.3 Reflections and Further Research.....	60
Bibliography.....	62

## **Abstract**

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**Title:** Black Jack: A New Perspective on Protean Career within Management Consulting

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**Keywords:** Career, protean career, traditional career, management consulting, career metaphors

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to investigate in what way employees at a global management consultancy firm experience protean career.

**Methodology:** Meanings and understandings were interpreted through a hermeneutical reading, with the assumption of social constructivism.

**Theoretical perspective:** The protean career metaphor, as well as parallels we have drawn between protean careers and management consulting careers, provide a theoretical basis for our research.

**Empirical Foundation:** The empirical material for our research was gathered through twelve semi-structured interviews with employees at the case company, Majesté, as well as two supplementary observations.

**Summary of Findings:** Our empirical material illustrated that whilst elements of a protean career are experienced at Majesté, the metaphor does not wholly reflect our interviewees' career experiences. Two "mysteries" emerge; values inconsistency, and illusions of career control. Therefore, the new metaphor of "Black Jack" is developed to reflect our interviewees' career experiences.

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*Susan, Teigan and Victoria*

## **Figures and Tables**

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Table 1: Summary of Methodological Approach.....	21
Figure 1: The Blurring of Individual Values into Organisational Values over Time.....	35
Figure 2: The Relationship between the Black Jack Metaphor, Organisational Values and Protean Values.....	57

## **1. Introduction**

The emergence of the knowledge-based economy over the last few decades (Forey & Lundvall, 1995; Soete, 1996; Whicher & Andrews, 2004) has prompted tremendous changes in the labour market; particularly in the areas of career development and career mobility. This has led to a dramatic change in how career is viewed today (Sullivan, 1999). Given the complexity of new perceptions of career, metaphors have been increasingly used to describe career phenomena (Morgan, 2006). Among these metaphors, the protean career, the boundaryless career, the kaleidoscope career, and many other variations have become prevalent in the literature (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Hall, 1996; Inkson, 2004; Carraher et al., 2009).

Prior to the emergence of these new metaphors for career, a more “traditional” perception of career existed. Traditionally, careers were pursued within one firm; where employees were expected to advance, vertically, within a strict and well-defined hierarchy (Wilensky, 1964; Levinson, 1978; Baruch, 2004). Success was evaluated through pay, rank and status (Etzioni, 1961; Maguire, 2002; Baruch, 2004; Carbrera, 2008; Valour & Ladge, 2008). Economic downturns in the 1980s and 1990s led to decreased trust in, and commitment to, organisations, as employees began to pursue new, non-traditional career paths (Hall, 2004). The “protean” metaphor was developed in this period to reflect these new career experiences.

The “protean” metaphor, as with any metaphor, evokes a variety of meanings and interpretations (Inkson, 2006). However, one of the central ideas behind the metaphor is that the individual, as opposed to the organisation, manages their career (Shepard, 1984; Hall & Mirvis, 1996; Hall & Moss, 1998; Hall, 2002). The individual manages their career in a self-directed way, driven by their own values, and evaluates their success based on these same values (Hall, 2002). An individual therefore feels independent and in control of their career (Briscoe et al., 2006). Given this independence and control, individuals are able to “reinvent themselves...as the person and the environment change” (Hall, 1996, p.8). They must therefore be adaptable and flexible in their approach to their career in order to achieve this (Hall, 1996). A protean career-oriented individual is values-driven and self-directed in terms of managing their career (Hall, 2002; Niles et al., 2002; Baruch 2004; Briscoe et al., 2006).

Certain organisations attract protean career-oriented individuals. These organisations typically promote autonomy and flexibility in work roles and career structure, and do not limit an individual's freedom through strict hierarchical or bureaucratic structures (Gasteiger & Briscoe, 1997). Furthermore, they have cultures that are characterised by dynamism and individual initiative (Gasteiger & Briscoe, 2007). An individual is able to most fully pursue a protean career within these organisations.

Wall (2005) contends that all modern organisations have to be protean in order to compete in today's constantly changing environment. More specifically, some authors argue that knowledge economy careers are of a protean nature (Baruch, 2004; Donnelly, 2009). Protean careers are more relevant to knowledge workers as they have the most to benefit from, and the most access to, extensive career opportunities (Tams & Arthur, 2006). Management consulting firms can be seen as a typical example of knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs); thus this assumption would apply to them (Starbuck, 1992). Management consulting careers and protean careers have many similarities, for example, management consultants have a high degree of autonomy in their work (Alvesson, 2004), and they are expected to manage their own career (O'Mahoney, 2010). Furthermore, consultants are expected to be adaptable and flexible; as change is prevalent throughout their careers (Stumpf, 1999). Consultants also thrive in a dynamic culture, as do protean-oriented individuals (Kubr, 2002; O'Mahoney, 2010). Therefore, a protean career should be possible, and would be expected, within a management consulting firm.

Scholars acknowledge that although the protean career concept has been extensively discussed in the literature, empirical research is still in its early stages (De Vos & Soens, 2008, p.449). We, therefore, aim to add to existing empirical research on the concept by investigating how a protean career is experienced within a management consulting firm. We will do so by interviewing management consultants within one particular organisation, which, for the purpose of this thesis, will be referred to as Majesté.

## **1.1 Research Question**

The guiding question for our empirical investigation, inspired by our research aim, is:

- *In what way do employees at Majesté experience protean career?*

Our research will be conducted through a methodological lens of social constructivism and hermeneutics, that recognises that “nothing means anything on its own....rather [meaning] is constructed. Constructed in this context means produced through acts of interpretation” (Steedman, 1991, p.54). Therefore, when addressing this question, we will focus on the actual understandings and meanings that employees at Majesté ascribe to their career, keeping in mind that these understandings, and our interpretations, are socially constructed.

## **1.2 Thesis Outline**

In order to address the research question, our thesis will be structured as follows. Section two will thoroughly review the existing literature and theories on career, and in particular, traditional career, protean career and management consulting careers. Section three discusses the methodological approach on which our research is based, as well as the method we used when conducting our research. Thereafter, section four starts with a brief description of the background of the case company, Majesté, and subsequently we present our findings from the interviews. The research findings are divided into three different main themes which we derived in an iterative process between themes inspired by previous literature and our empirical material. These themes are “values-driven”, “self-directedness” and “influence of the organisation on career management”. Section five discusses the research findings and the most prominent “mysteries” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) that emerged throughout the process, namely, “values inconsistency” and “illusions of career control”. As a result of our findings, and subsequent mysteries we propose a new metaphor to describe the career experience of our interviewees at Majesté

The final section concludes the thesis by presenting our main findings, our theoretical contribution and the reflections on our research and recommendations for future research.

## **2. Literature Review**

In this section, traditional and protean perspectives on career are presented. The similarities between the protean career and career as it is experienced within the management consulting industry are then explored. The overarching purpose of this chapter is to provide a context for our research, but also to illuminate themes that will provide inspiration for our analysis.

## **2.1 The Traditional Career**

Wilensky (1964) encapsulates traditional perspectives on career in that it is “a succession of related jobs, arranged in a hierarchy of prestige, through which persons move in an ordered, predictable sequence” (p.554). The traditional perspective on career was a remnant of the industrial age where classical hierarchical systems for careers were exercised by production organisations (Wilensky, 1964). Although this perspective did not have a defined starting or ending point it can be said to have dominated research and practice until the late 1970s (Sullivan, 1990). Careers were perceived to be linear, rigid, and usually occurring within one organisation (Levinson, 1978). Given that careers occurred only within one organisation, organisations were perceived to have a greater influence on an individual’s career, due to the amount of time (often many decades) that an employee would spend at an organisation (Baruch, 2004). Organisations also influenced careers through the psychological contract; an unwritten set of expectations, held by the employee, about the employment relationship (Sims, 1994). Employees could expect to receive secure, potentially life-long employment and career progression in exchange for commitment to the organisation (Maguire, 2002). Such careers existed as bureaucratic and hierarchical organisational structures supported them (Sullivan, 1999) by providing clear, vertical advancement paths (Baruch, 2004). Organisations were perceived to be able to control careers as these careers were often experienced only within one company, and hierarchical structures and the psychological contracts dictated how an employee moves through this hierarchy.

The structures that influenced the traditional perspective on career also influenced how individuals perceived their success. From a traditional career perspective, the sole aim was to progress (vertically) within the organisation’s hierarchy (Hall, 1996). Success was thus “evaluated via the rate of upward mobility and external indicators of achievement” (Baruch, 2004, p.60). These external indicators of achievement are most typically rank and title, social status, and a steadily rising income (Etzioni, 1961; Maguire, 2002; Baruch, 2004; Cabrera, 2008; Valour & Ladge, 2008). These aligned quite closely with organisational values in economic terms, in that organisations were primarily concerned with maximising profit, and this could be functionally achieved if employees valued material rewards (income) and symbols of material rewards (rank and social status) (Etzioni, 1961). Although these evaluations of success are typically associated with “traditional” perspectives of career, McDonald et al. (2004)’s case study of a large public sector firm illustrates that these indicators of success may still be prevalent today. Despite McDonald et al.’s (2004)

conclusions, career success was more traditionally evaluated through rank, status, and pay. These are, from now on, referred to as “traditional values”.

Traditional perspectives on career, however, gave way to new perspectives due to a variety of macro-economic changes. In the 1980s and 90s, economic downturns and organisational restructuring led to decreased trust in, and commitment to, organisations (Hall, 2004). Employees were thus forced to be flexible as they faced the possibility of redundancy, despite good performance (Baruch, 2004). Economic conditions thus led to employees changing career direction and employers more and more often, engaging in continuous learning, and viewing the career as a series of life cycles (Hall & Mirvis, 1996). Thus, the psychological contract between employees and employers had changed from a long-term relational one to a short-term, transactional contract (Hall & Moss, 1998). People were increasingly taking charge of their careers (as opposed to organisations influencing them) and freedom to pursue alternative career paths within their careers was becoming more important to them (Hall, 1976). It is within this macro-economic context that the concept of “protean career” was developed. This concept is explored further below.

## **2.2 The Protean Career**

“Protean” is a metaphor used to describe the new career phenomenon that has emerged. The usefulness of the protean metaphor in furthering our understanding of the career phenomenon is examined first. Following this, the protean metaphor is explained in depth by examining the evolution of the concept, and how it is viewed today; namely, that an individual must be “values-driven” and “self-directed” in order to experience a protean career. “Protean” will then be examined from a more organisational perspective; in terms of the kind of organisation that may attract individuals who want to pursue a protean career.

As Morgan (2006) points out, organisational metaphors “create insights...[but] also have limitations” (p.338). It is thus important to evaluate their usefulness. A metaphor functions as an organising mechanism for experience and thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Cornelissen et al., 2008), but is a complex device that elicits only “partial truths” (Morgan, 2006). Due to this complexity, it is difficult to evaluate a metaphor’s usefulness. Morgan (2006) developed a general criterion for assessing the usefulness of a metaphor in that it should “imply a way of thinking and a way of seeing that pervades how we understand our world generally” (p.4).

Inkson (2006), however, developed a more complex set of criteria to specifically evaluate the protean metaphor. He found that it “appears right for the times. The meanings...and the imagery it conveys are in sympathy with conditions of rapid technological, organisation and social change” (p. 49). Furthermore, he found that the metaphor insinuates individual agency and emancipation from the constraints of the traditional career (Inkson, 2006). Thus, the protean metaphor satisfies both Morgan’s (2006) and Inkson’s (2006) evaluations of metaphors in that it generally, and specifically, adds value to our understanding of career phenomena.

Having established that protean is indeed a useful metaphor to describe emerging career phenomena, the development of the concept itself and the elaboration of it in theory will now be examined. The protean career metaphor was pioneered by Douglas D. Hall, who has produced dozens of works on the concept since his seminal chapter on it in his 1976 book *Careers in Organisations* (Hall, 1976). Originally, the protean concept referred directly to Proteus, a figure from the Greek mythology that was able to change form according to the circumstances (Inkson, 2006). From this, it is inferred that a protean career-orientated individual would be flexible and adaptable in their approach to their (career) circumstances (Hall, 1996; Inkson, 2006). As the concept developed in the literature, it also came to be associated with the notion that the individual, not the organisation, was in charge of career (Shepard, 1984; Hall & Moss, 1996; Hall & Mirvis, 1998; Hall, 2002). Some authors have more recently divided the concept into two main areas, in that an individual must be values-driven, and self-directed to be protean (Hall, 2002; Niles et al., 2002; Baruch 2004; Briscoe et al., 2006). Although these concepts are interrelated, in that an individual manages their career in a self-directed way, driven by their own values, and evaluating their success based on these values (Hall, 2002), the two attributes of values-driven and self-directed are separated for the purpose of this thesis. The protean concept has thus been developed in the literature to represent adaptability and flexibility, and that individuals must be values-driven and self-directed in managing their own career.

Protean career-oriented individuals are perceived to be values-driven in that they are: “intent upon using their own values (versus organisational values) to guide their career” (Briscoe et al., 2006, p.31). Hall (2004) claims that from a protean career perspective, “the core values are freedom and growth” (p.4). Sargent and Domberger (2007), however, challenge Hall’s claims in that they argue that other core values may exist, for example, making a personal

contribution to one's work or society as a whole, and maintaining a work-life balance. Protean career-oriented individuals will be aware of their own values, and use these to drive their career and evaluate their own success (Briscoe et al., 2006). For example, if individuals value freedom, they will evaluate their success on the degree of freedom that their career allows them. By using their values to evaluate success, individuals will be able to achieve what Hall (1996) describes as "psychological success"; "the feeling of pride and personal accomplishment that comes from achieving one's most important goals in life" (p.8). Individuals' evaluation of their success will therefore be unique to them, as opposed to "borrowing" external standards and values of the organisation (Briscoe et al., 2006). Although organisations are being forced to become more socially responsible, and hence claim to have a variety of values<sup>1</sup>, from an economic perspective they are primarily concerned with the bottom line (profit) as without this their business cannot continue (Crane & Matten, 2007). Thus, we assume for the purpose of this thesis that organisational values are still largely traditional and would not apply to a protean career oriented individual. An individual can thus be protean if they are driven by their own individual values and thus experience psychological success.

Some authors, however, take the attribute of "values-driven" to a more extreme level. Shepard (1984) offers a more all-encompassing definition of protean career, stating that an individual's career can be a "path with a heart". An individual's career is an issue of the heart in that "the central issue is a life fully worth living. The test is how you feel each day as you anticipate that day's experience" (Shepard, 1984, p.175). An even more intense version of a "path with a heart" sees a protean career as one where an individual views their work as a spiritual calling, where an individual finds ultimate meaning in fulfilment in their career, whilst at the same time working towards the common good and making a positive contribution to the community (Hall, 2002). Although useful in theory, this idealised and romantic notion of a protean career may not be so relevant to the consulting industry as pressures and structures within consulting firms do not always allow an individual to follow a "path with a heart" (Shepard, 1984). Shepard (1984) and Hall (2002) proposed more extreme and idealistic versions of the values-driven attribute of protean career, in the "path with a heart" and "an individual's calling" concepts.

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<sup>1</sup> Organisations increasingly have values such as "environmental sustainability" and "community development". These values are often enacted through corporate citizenship programmes (Crane and Matten, 2007).

The second attribute of a protean career is self-directedness. An individual is self-directed in that “the career is managed by the person, not the organisation” (Hall & Moss, 1998, p.25). If individuals successfully manage their own career, they would display a number of attributes such as: self-reliance in terms of moving their career forward, feeling personally responsible for the success or failure of their career, having freedom to make choices that would affect their career, and having, and exercising the option to leave the organisation should they not feel satisfied (Briscoe et al., 2006). Thus, individuals would feel independent and in control of their career (Briscoe et al., 2006). Given this independence and control, individuals are able to “reinvent themselves from time to time, as the person and the environment change” (Hall, 1996, p.8). Flexibility and adaptability in their approach to career are therefore important in order to cope with this change. Self-directedness within the protean concept refers to individuals who believe they are in control of their career, and the choices within their career.

Having discussed attributes of a protean career from an individual’s perspective, it is important to understand what attributes of an organisation may attract protean career-oriented individuals. According to Gasteiger and Briscoe (1997), these individuals “have a clear notion of how the organisation they want to join should look like in order to be able to pursue their unique career path in a self-directed manner following their own values” (p.6). Protean career-oriented individuals prefer organisations that have a culture marked by dynamism and individual initiative, they also prefer organisations that do not limit an individual’s freedom through hierarchical structure or bureaucracy (Gasteiger & Briscoe, 1997, p.2). Thus, just as a protean individual needs to be flexible and adaptable, they also prefer an organisation where there is an opportunity for autonomy and flexibility in their work roles and career structure, coupled with a dynamic and initiative-driven culture.

Certain organisations are also able to facilitate protean careers better than others (Hall & Moss, 1998). Hall and Moss (1998) contend that a protean career is optimal in an organisation that enables its employees to manage their own career by providing opportunities, continuous learning, new work challenges and resources so that the employee can develop their identity. An organisation should refrain from assuming responsibility for its employees’ careers; instead they should help their employees to develop their own career (Hall, 2002). An employee can have a protean career orientation if the organisation facilitates this by enabling them to manage their own career.

The protean metaphor represents an individual who has a self-directed and values-driven career orientation, whilst at the same time being flexible and adaptable in the face of change. A protean career is best realised within an organisation that has a culture characterised by dynamism and individual initiative, and not with strict hierarchical structures. An organisation can also facilitate protean careers if they allow individuals the freedom to manage their careers. The next sub-section discusses the similarities between the attributes of protean career, which we have identified above, and the management consulting career.

### **2.3 The Management Consulting Career**

This section will review the literature on the consulting industry and demonstrate how a protean career orientation is possible, and indeed, expected within management consulting. Some authors acknowledge that knowledge economy careers, and specifically management consulting careers should be protean (Kalleberg, 2000; Baruch, 2004; Donnelly, 2009). However, we thoroughly explore why this might be the case by drawing parallels between the above mentioned areas of protean career, and a management consulting career.

Management consultants can be seen as values-driven and self-directed in many ways; attributes which are important in a protean career orientation (Hall, 2004). Individuals within management consultancies use their “intellectual and symbolic skills” to perform highly complex work, within which they enjoy a high degree of autonomy (Alvesson, 2004, p.21). Consultancies demand a high degree of autonomy from their consultants, not only in terms of the work they do, but also in terms of consultants “look[ing] out for their own career” (O’Mahoney, 2010, p. 282). Thus, freedom is experienced and indeed encouraged within consultancies. In terms of growth, consultancies claim to provide very unique and fast career paths to their employees (O’Mahoney, 2010). This growth is facilitated through rigorous training programs, as well as by the long hours that consultants work, hence spending more time learning on the job (Meriläinen et al., 2004). Continuous growth is also encouraged as consultants are in constant competition with themselves and each other in order to be the “best of the best” (Meriläinen et al., 2004). In terms of career management (self-directedness) consultants are able to influence their career as they essentially own the “means of production” in that their input is knowledge, processing occurs via knowledge and output is knowledge (Alvesson, 2004). It is this “knowledge output” that is used to evaluate their success (Wolf, 2010) both in their career, and in terms of the organisation, as the aim of management consultancies is to “create value for organisations, through the application of

knowledge, techniques and assets to improve business performance” (O’Mahoney, 2010, p.14). Management consultants can be seen to be values-driven, in that they value freedom and growth within their career (and it is also expected from them). They are also self-directed in their influence over their career as they are knowledge workers; hence “owning” their key to success.

Management consultants are also flexible and adaptable in their approach to career; an approach which is common to a protean career (Hall, 1996). Consultancies deliberately recruit graduates who are comfortable with fast paced change (Stumpf, 1999). Clark (2009) argues the ability to cope with change is ultimately important as it will influence a consultant’s ability to network with different colleagues, clients and other stakeholders, thus greatly influencing their career success. Kubr (2002) also lists “flexibility, adaptability and the ability to learn quickly” (p.785) as important attributes of a consultant, as they are often forced to “hit the ground running... [on projects] despite their lack of experience in that particular field” (Adams & Zanzi, 2004, p.560). Thus, management consultants must be flexible and adaptable, similarly to those with a protean career orientation.

Cultures within management consulting firms are dynamic and encourage individual initiative; an attribute which attracts protean career orientated individuals (Gasteiger & Briscoe, 2007). Cultures within management consultancies can be seen as dynamic, in that individuals within consultancies should show motivation, energy, trustworthiness and intellectual and emotional maturity (Kubr, 2002; O’Mahoney, 2010). This dynamism is also seen as key to their success in that the so called “up-or-out” culture ensures that consultants either perform and move up or leave the firm (O’Mahoney, 2010). As the aim of management consultancy is to provide and “implement tailored business solutions” (O’Mahoney, 2010, p.14), initiative is encouraged in that individuals are required to make an individual contribution (Stumpf, 1999). This may be true of the individual’s contribution and initiatives within the firm as a whole, however, consultancies have been criticised for providing “cookie cutter” solutions that lack originality, and hence, individual initiative (Pringle, 1998). However, individuals with a protean career orientation would be attracted to management consultancies, as they appear to provide a culture of dynamism, and individual initiative.

The career path experienced within management consultancies, as well as the structure of them, however, cannot strictly be described as protean. A consultant’s career path is typically

well defined. A consultant usually starts after university graduation, and then follows a general career path: they begin as an analyst, and then climb the corporate ladder by successively being promoted to consultant, associate consultant, project leader, principal consultant and eventually partner (O'Mahoney, 2010, p.333). A consultant's progression is determined by their performance, but also whether there is a position available at the next level (which is determined by the firm's leverage ratio – the ratio of partners to consultants) (O'Mahoney, 2010). As higher ranked consultants must be paid higher salaries and benefits, and charged out to clients at a higher price, consultancies are under competitive pressure to keep service costs down, hence maintain strict hierarchical structures (Merilänen et al., 2004). As Gasteiger and Briscoe (1997) point out, protean-oriented individuals do not ultimately thrive in organisations with these structures, as it is perceived to limit their freedom.

The literature (Kalleberg, 2000; Baruch, 2004; Donnelly, 2009) as well as the parallels we have drawn between management consulting careers and protean careers illustrate that a protean career should be possible within management consultancy. Management consultancy careers and protean careers have many similarities, for example, that consultants and protean career-oriented individuals are values-driven and self-directed, and that they are flexible and adaptable in their approach to career. Furthermore, management consultancies have dynamic and initiative-orientated cultures which are theorised to attract protean career-orientated individuals (Gasteiger & Briscoe, 1997). It must be noted, however, that individuals' careers within consulting firms may not be able to be ultimately protean due to the hierarchies and career paths in place. The relationship that we have established above between management consulting careers and protean careers will henceforth be used as an inspiration for our analysis in that we draw on general main themes we have developed, as opposed to verifying/falsifying our assumptions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). The following methodology section explains, in more detail, how and why we do this.

### **3. Method and Methodology**

Campbell and Wasco (2000) assert that in order to conduct social science research, we need to “re-examine the foundation of science from square one: what is knowledge and how is knowledge obtained?” (p.779). Accordingly, decisions regarding ontology and epistemology are central to any researcher's work. Ontology and epistemology also exert significant influence on methodology and method (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000). This section discusses

the ontological and epistemological foundations of our research, and how they influence our methodology and methods. We also outline our research process.

### **3.1 Ontological and Epistemological Considerations**

The meaning of ontology and epistemology are by no means clear (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002; Bates & Jenkins, 2007). Definitions and different choices available to researchers will be outlined here. Ontology can be quite simply defined as the nature of physical and social reality (Carter & Little, 2007, p.1326) whereas epistemology can be seen as the process of “justifying and evaluating knowledge” (Carter & Little, 2007, p.1317). Easterby-Smith et al. (2002), however, provide a broader, more explanatory definition in that ontology is the “assumptions that we make about the nature of reality” and epistemology is the “general set of assumptions about the best way of inquiring into the nature of the world” (p.31). Ontologically, researchers are essentially faced with the decision as to whether they will accept the notion that there is one objective reality, or whether reality is socially constructed (to various degrees) (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). Epistemologically, researchers are faced with numerous different choices. There seems to be no agreement in the literature regarding what the primary epistemologies of social science are, or if any can be classified as “primary” at all. Easterby-Smith et al. (2002) identify positivism, relativism and social constructivism as the main three epistemologies. Campbell and Wasco (2000) agree with these three, however, also add “critical theory” to their list. Uddin and Hamiduzzaman (2009), however, identify up to 20 different epistemologies as being central to social science research. Researchers are thus faced with many different choices in regards to ontology and epistemology. Our specific choices in regards to these phenomena are now discussed.

We assume (ontologically) that reality is socially constructed, and also adopt the epistemological standpoint of “social constructivism”. As a result of this standpoint, we believe there is no such thing as objective facts or objective reality (Wildemuth, 1993; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Alvesson, 2003). An objective reality in the context of our research would assume that there was one given reality about career. Instead we assume that reality, and hence careers, are social constructions (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Sandberg & Targama, 2007). Therefore, we believe that “our understanding of reality is created by ourselves and others on the basis of our experiences and through communication and interaction with other people” (Sandberg & Targama, 2007, p.29). In conclusion, we see reality as a social construct based on the perspective of the interpreter and aim to understand

this reality by interpreting our interviewees' assertions about their career. Having outlined our epistemological and ontological position, we now discuss our research design.

### **3.2 Research Design – A Reflexive Approach**

Methodology and methods are not “neutral” techniques; they are influenced by, and reflect epistemological and ontological assumptions (Doucet & Mauthner, 2003). Methodology is defined as the “combination of techniques used to enquire into a specific situation” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002, p.31). Methods are the “individual techniques for data collection, analysis, etc.” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002, p.31). Scholars have varying opinions on the relationship between ontology and epistemology; they cannot agree as to whether ontology precedes epistemology or vice versa (Bates & Jenkins, 2007). We, however, agree with those researchers who claim that ontology and epistemology are highly interconnected and that “none of these concepts emerges prior to the other” (Bates & Jenkins, 2007, p.60).

Scholars also do not agree on how epistemology/ontology and method/methodology are related. Carter and Little (2007) claim that epistemology influences methodology, and that methodology guides the method, which produces empirical material and analysis (p.1317). Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) agree, arguing that researchers have pre-existing methodological assumptions and methods are a product of these assumptions. Harding (1992), however, disagrees in arguing that whilst methodology is linked to ontology and epistemology, method is a secondary choice. Doucet and Mauthner (2003) also agree that ontology/epistemology and methodology/method are related, however, they assert that these connections may only become obvious retrospectively and thus, may not form part of the actual research project at the time. Although scholars cannot agree on the nature of the relationship between ontology/epistemology and methodology/method, for the purpose of this thesis we choose to agree with Alvesson and Sköldberg's (2000) contention that they influence each other.

Having established the connection between ontology/epistemology, and methodology/method, our chosen methodology, as well as reflexivity, and how it will be incorporated into our research is discussed. Firstly, what does it mean to be “reflexive”? Reflexivity involves two main considerations; recognising that the analysis of empirical material is the result of interpretation, and also, reflection on the “whole story” of the research, including, but not limited to, the researchers themselves, the society as a whole and

the form of presentation of the research material (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). Scholars cast varying levels of doubt on the issue of reflexivity. Lynch (2000), for example, argues that reflexivity adds little to research work, whereas Doucet and Mauthner (2003) contend that true reflexivity is only possible retrospectively, months or even years after the research has been conducted. Despite their musings, reflexivity is a central part of research within social constructivism as it enables the researcher, and reader, to question the multitude of meanings and understandings throughout the research process. This enables the researcher to reach a greater depth of understanding of the empirical material in that the material “never exists outside perspective and interpretive repertoires” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p.1266).

Having acknowledged the importance of reflexivity, it will now be discussed how we incorporate reflexivity in our research through our chosen methodology, hermeneutics. Reflexivity can occur on a number of levels. For example, Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) outline four main orientations or “methodologies” in reflexive research, namely, grounded theory, hermeneutics, critical theory and post-modernism. When used together, these four levels of reflexivity allow interpretation on the following levels: “contact with the empirical material, awareness of the interpretive act, clarification of political-ideological contexts, and the handling of the question of representation and authority” (p.238). In conducting research, we aim to be aware of all four levels of reflexivity, however, due to the scope of this thesis and time constraints, we primarily focus on hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, as our methodology, mainly allows reflexivity on the first two levels mentioned above, that is, awareness of interpretation when in contact with the empirical material. Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) outline two main types of hermeneutics: firstly objectivist, which is concerned with the cyclical relationship between the part and the whole, and alethic, which is concerned with the relationship between pre-understanding and understanding. Our hermeneutical understanding is based on the assumption that the person and the world are intertwined and that the individual is connected to the world through their “lived experience or understanding” of it (Sandberg & Targama, 2007, p.28). Our research focuses on hermeneutical analysis through the awareness of the part-whole and pre-understanding-understanding relationship.

Hermeneutic analysis affects how we perceive our empirical material, as well as our own role in the research. We view our empirical material as “the part”, which needs to be viewed in context of “the whole” that is, within the context of the whole study, in relation to other studies, as well as in relation to the “experienced” world. Specifically, as we see career as a

social construct, we want to focus on the interviewee as a whole given all aspects of their life instead of just understanding their “job”. In terms of our pre-understanding, as we are middle-class, educated females who had prior understanding of the topic and the organisation being studied naturally influences our interpretations, thus, “authors cannot be seen in isolation, they need to be placed in their social context.” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p.54). Furthermore, we are aware of the subjectivity and context-dependency of the interviewees’ assertions based on their own understandings and pre-understandings (Alvesson, 2003, p.13). We aim to understand the meanings people ascribe to phenomena, instead of providing explanations about an objective and independent reality (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Hermeneutical analysis broadens our understanding of our empirical material, and ourselves as researchers by considering the whole context of the research.

Our methodology influenced our methods. With regard to collection of empirical material, social constructivists will typically favour qualitative methods, for example, interviews and field observations, as opposed to quantitative methods which they believe “force people into a restricted variety of response or reaction alternatives” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p.203). Alvesson (2003) also notes that organisational studies in general are “strongly oriented towards empirical material” (p.28). It is for this reason that we placed an emphasis on semi-structured interviews. Influenced by our epistemological and ontological considerations, we have chosen to perform a qualitative study, and within this, use semi-structured interviews.

We specifically choose to use metaphors within our thesis, just as hermeneutics widens our understanding of phenomena and allows different interpretations, so does the use of metaphors (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). Metaphors, according to Inkson (2006), “give[s] texture to abstract concepts...and therefore provide a currency for understanding one’s situation...and for developing new insights” (p.48). Using metaphors to describe careers is of increasing interest in organisational studies (Morgan, 1986; Grant & Osrick, 1996; Baruch, 2004). Metaphors are associated with interpretation and understanding and hence challenge positivist thinking (Grant & Osrick, 1996). The use of metaphors can contribute to a greater understanding of phenomena within careers by encouraging creative associations with the subject of the metaphor, thus viewing careers through a different lens (Inkson, 2004). We have chosen to use metaphors as they assist the reader to understand and interpret phenomena.

Finally, hermeneutics also influences our analysis and final theoretical contribution. In keeping with the pre-understanding/understanding of alethic hermeneutics, we agree with Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) when they argue that interpretation precedes empirical material in all research. We also agree with Geertz (1973) in that ideas for analysis must be obtained from existing literature. Our interpretations were at least partly based on existing literature, as well as our own experience with the topic. Therefore, when analysing our empirical material, we draw inspiration from themes we develop in our literature review, as well as themes identified throughout the analysis process. The process was iterative, and could be said to abductive, in that we identify patterns based on our own pre-understandings (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). As we will show in section four, the protean metaphor does not describe the career experience of our interviewees at Majesté. We thus developed a new metaphor to describe their career situation, according to the process proposed by Weick (1989) for metaphor development: variation, selection and retention. We then “project” the metaphor onto our empirical findings in the sense that we deduced it and then “imposed and applied it to the organisational situation” (Cornelissen et al., 2008). Our ontological, epistemological and methodological position can be summarised in the following table. Having discussed the ontological, epistemological and methodological foundations of our research, we now briefly discuss our research process.

***Table 1: Summary of Methodological Approach***

Ontology	The world is socially constructed
Epistemology	Social constructivism
Methodology	Hermeneutics
Methods	Qualitative material, semi-structured interviews
Theory	Protean metaphor and Black Jack metaphor
Analysis	Abduction from themes in literature review and emergent themes in the analysis

### **3.3 Research Process**

The empirical material for our research was gathered through twelve semi-structured interviews, as well as two supplementary observations. Observations played a smaller role in our research; however two separate tours and evenings spent with employees from Majesté,

allowed us to view their behaviour outside of a work environment. Overall the process provided us with an opportunity to understand, and document, the interviewees' opinions and experiences (Martin & Turner, 1986).

The research process took approximately one month to gather; in this time we also transcribed all the interviews. The transcriptions equated to 220 pages of empirical material. During the process, we focused on gathering a variety of participants. We interviewed employees working in different service lines (both in technology consulting and management consulting), as well as in different stages of their careers. We met with participants whom had been offered a position within the firm and would be commencing within six months, some which have been in the company for several years, as well as two former employees. During the financial crisis, two of our participants were made redundant at Majesté, but subsequently were offered their positions back within one year. This allowed us to gain a well-rounded view on how career is viewed from different perspectives.

An initial interview guide was set up with the main theme being "career". We developed the questions based on our own experience with the topic, keeping in mind that they needed to encourage full and spontaneous descriptions (Kvalle, 1996). This interview guide was updated as we gained insight into which areas we believed would be more fruitful for analysis. Each interview lasted between 60-90 minutes, and our interviews were conducted on a three on one format, with one participant, two researchers and one observer. Having three researchers enabled us to gain greater depth in terms of meanings, interpretations and understandings.

We purposely used a variety of different meeting areas when interviewing the participants. We conducted interviews in interviewees' homes, in coffee shops and at the university library. Thus, all except for the meetings in coffee shops, our interviews were held in comfortable, private and quiet areas; the ideal interview setting according to Payne (1999). All interviews were conducted in English, even though most participants were native Swedish speaking. If interviewees did not understand our questions or could not find the words to answer, one of the researchers who was fluent in Swedish was able to translate. By means of an iterative process, we constantly reviewed our findings and used them to update our interview guide.

### **3.4 Evaluation of Research Design and Process**

Unlike quantitative methods, which can be assessed using reliability and validity measures, there is much debate on how to assess qualitative methods (Rolfe, 2006). As Rolfe (2006) asserts “establishing a quality criteria for qualitative research is unlikely to succeed as...there is no unified body of theory, methodology or method that can be collectively described as qualitative research” (p.305). Morse et al. (2002) believe that the quality of qualitative methods should be assessed in a similar fashion to quantitative methods (using reliability), whereas other scholars believe different criteria should be established, for example, Guba and Lincoln (1998) propose that trustworthiness and authenticity would be a more appropriate measure. Sandelowski and Barroso (2002), assert that the focus of quality assessment should not be on the research study itself but instead on the report as it is the “the dynamic vehicle that mediates between the researcher/writer and reviewer/reader, rather than a factual account of events after the fact” (p.3). Qualitative studies are difficult to assess because “quality judgements entail a subjective reading of the research text, and the responsibility for appraising research lies with the reader rather than with the writer of report” (Rolfe, 2006, p.309). It is difficult for researchers to reach a consensus on how to assess the quality of qualitative studies as “qualitative” is difficult to define, and there is a lot of interpretation involved in the process, from the perspective of both the researcher and reader.

Despite the lack of consensus within academia on how to evaluate qualitative methods, an essential part of reflexivity is careful assessment and reflection (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). Hence, one criteria will be selected to evaluate our methods, that of “source criticism”, a “hermeneutic but rigorous method, which sets up a number of criteria for the evaluation and interpretation of data” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p.69). Source criticism aims to understand the complex relationship between the empirical material and the researcher (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). There are four different elements that must be considered within source criticism: sources, authenticity, bias, and distance and dependence (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p.70). Each will be explored here in turn, as well as an assessment of the use of “metaphor” in our research.

According to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000), sources are “any entity that can provide the researcher with knowledge of a past event” (p.70). Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) also distinguish between remnant and narrating sources, where remnants have direct exposure to

an event, whereas a narrating source expresses an event, with “remnants being worth more” (p.70). It can be seen that our interviewees could be classified as remnants, as they were speaking about their interpretations of events that happened to them, personally. Thus, the sources for our interviews can be considered the most valuable in the situation.

Authenticity is also a key consideration, and it is concerned with individuals and their intentions: that is, whether a source is a source (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p.71). In terms of interview participants, all individuals willingly participated in interviews with us, however, some interviewees did appear concerned that the company would be able to view their interview responses. We did assure them confidentiality, as suggested by Payne (1999), which eased their concern. Some interviewees also made reference to the “corporate identity” which they invoke when they meet strangers for the first time. This “identity” involved not revealing too much information about themselves to people they had just met. Thus, had we, not been subject to time constraints it may have been better to get to know our interviewees so they would have felt more comfortable with us. Beyond this, we had no reason to doubt the genuine intentions of our interview participants.

Bias refers to “the coherence of meaning” and whether there may have been a misrepresentation of information (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p.72). The whole interview situation can be a cause for bias, the researcher needs to ask “who is speaking, and with what purpose?” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). In our interviews, some bias was encountered; a few interview participants appeared to want to sell the company to us, whereas others warned us against joining. As we interviewed a range of employees, we had what Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) would call “counter-biased” sources, to achieve balance within the process (p.72). Beyond the interviewees, the whole interview situation needs to be reflected upon, to identify sources of bias. Alvesson (2003) demonstrates that the interview situation is a complex arena of meanings and that the researcher must make a “conscious and consistent effort to view the subject matter from different angles” (p.14). Roulston (2010) also notes the need to be aware of the interplay between content and context within the interview situation. We are also aware that our own bias may have skewed our lines of questioning, as well as our analysis. The point, however, is not in eliminating bias, but more so being aware of it, in that “it is a matter of adding together different perspectives (biases) in order to gain a picture of the whole” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p. 73). Thus, being aware of different biases was our main aim when conducting our analysis.

The final part of source criticism is that of “distance and dependence”. “Distance” refers to the source’s remoteness from the event (the more remote, the less valuable), whereas “dependence” refers to information passing through various hands (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p.73). With the interview participants who were working with the company, distance is irrelevant as they were experiencing the phenomena on a daily basis. We did, however, interview two employees who had left the company (both had left the company less than twelve months ago). Here, it must be noted that their perspectives on the company may have changed and developed within the context of their new positions with other companies. There were no issues experienced with dependence as the interviews we conducted were primary sources, conducted directly between the interviewees and us.

Beyond these four elements, it is necessary for the researcher to be aware of empathy within the research process, which “complements source criticism” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p.75). Empathy can be valuable from both sides. Firstly, the researchers were acutely aware of some of the interviewees’ personal situations; knowing some of them personally before the research process began. The researchers own empathy was also incorporated throughout the research, creating a rich interplay of personal interpretations and meanings.

Finally, we recognise that using a metaphor as a basis for our analysis, and developing our own metaphor to explain empirical material, can have some limitations. There can never be a “single metaphor that gives an all-purpose point of view” (Morgan, 2006, p.338). In fact, metaphors have been criticised for over simplifying or distorting perceptions (Inkson, 2006; Morgan, 2006). Many other problems with metaphors within organisational studies have been identified, for example, that metaphors do not specify what is metaphorical within their research context, that scholars often “extrapolate too readily from identified metaphors” and finally that reliability assessments are often not incorporated into metaphor development (Cornelissen et al., 2008, 15-17). We were aware of these shortcomings of metaphors throughout our research, however, believed that the benefits of using them outweighed the weaknesses.

Having outlined our method and methodology, we will now proceed to the analysis of our empirical material.

## **4. Analysis: Findings**

The aim of this section is to present our empirical material. The presentation is divided into three themes that were both inspired by our literature review and those that emerged throughout the analysis process. These themes are: whether the interviewees were driven by protean or traditional values, the self-directedness of the interviewees and the influence of the organisation on its interviewees' career management. The emphasis is on the perceptions, understandings and meanings that the interviewees ascribe to these three themes as opposed to uncovering facts about the interviewees. In order to give the empirical material some context, this section will begin with a brief presentation of Majesté. Through presenting the empirical material, this section will demonstrate in what way the employees at Majesté experience protean career.

### **4.1 The Case: Majesté**

We will begin by briefly describing Majesté and how career is managed within the organisation. Majesté is a large firm that offers IT and management consulting services. They currently have over 200,000 employees worldwide. We focused on the Öresund region, where there are approximately 1,000 employees. Majesté is generally perceived positively and markets itself as providing high quality services to large organisations around the world.

Majesté claims to look for certain attributes when recruiting new employees. An "ideal" consultant will have exceptional communication, leadership and analytical skills as well as high grades. Flexibility and adaptability in their approach to career are also claimed to be important attributes of a potential new hire.

The career path at Majesté is typical of most consultancies – somewhat strict and clearly defined (O'Mahoney, 2010). Progression for consultants typically follows a five step process: analyst, consultant, manager, senior manager and partner. New graduates usually start out at analyst level, and have the opportunity to advance to consultant after two years. Thereafter, advancement to managers takes approximately two to four years. The step up to senior executive after that greatly depends on the ability of the individual.

The promotion system that determines employees' "growth" within the company, is based on two dimensions; the first being the value the employee adds to the clients, the second being

the value the employee adds to Majesté, in terms of work functions, community involvement, participation with graduate recruitment etc. Majesté claims to rigorously assess these dimensions when making promotion decisions. It is expected that both dimensions are practiced to some extent by every employee.

Ultimately, Majesté claims to recruit the “best of the best”. In return for their hard work, Majesté promises their employees the possibility of opportunities, growth and fulfilment. Having provided a background of Majesté, we will now present our empirical material.

#### **4.2 Protean versus Traditional Values**

This part of the analysis examines the interviewees’ values, and how they evaluate their success. It appears that many interviewees had “protean” values, in that they were driven by psychological success (Hall, 1996). Some interviewees even displayed a “path with a heart” (Shepard, 1984). Other interviewees, however, appeared to be driven by more traditional values, such as pay, rank and status (Maguire, 2002; Baruch, 2004; Cabrera, 2008). Each value set is examined in turn.

Hall (1996) argues that the goal of the protean career is psychological success, where “the feeling of pride and personal accomplishment that comes from achieving one’s most important goals in life, be they achievement, family happiness, inner peace, or something else” (p.8) is achieved. Interviewees appeared to value freedom and growth, as well as making a personal contribution; values that are considered protean (Hall, 2004; Sargent & Domberger, 2007).

Several employees exclaimed that they appreciate the freedom and autonomy of their profession, and that it guided them to grow and pursue personalised challenges:

*“I need the freedom, not like big brother watching you. My freedom is important to me.” (Consultant)*

*“I’m trying to teach myself. I’ve set personalised goals, in terms of what I want to learn about myself, and what I can achieve.”(Consultant)*

The idea of freedom and autonomy were also extensively discussed during two corporate functions that we attended at Majesté when we asked employees what attracted them to the company. Furthermore, we also found that some interviewees emphasised the protean values of growth and development:

*“For me it is about finding out what you want and developing yourself. Everybody doesn’t want to develop themselves in an upward direction.”*  
(Analyst)

*“A career is about developing myself as a person and always challenging myself.”* (Consultant)

*“Personal growth is more important than money and success.”* (Analyst)

Not only are freedom and growth two dominant values that surfaced during the interviews, but so is adding a valuable contribution to the organisation, team or client. Contributing appears to really motivate our interviewees, and they used this perceived contribution to evaluate their success:

*“It is important to me to feel like I can do a really fun and good job. If nobody is actually waiting for that job or is expecting it to be delivered, I lose motivation.”*  
(Consultant)

*“A career for me is to achieve something in one way or another in some area that you feel you want to contribute with.”* (Consultant)

*“Even though it is a massive global company, I still feel like I add value to the project and company. Management sees what I am doing.”* (Consultant)

Thus, interviewees exhibited “protean” values in that they were driven by their own personal values of freedom, growth and a desire to make a personal contribution to the organisation. Therefore, they can be seen to be experiencing psychological success, as they are using their own values to evaluate their success.

Beyond psychological success, interviewees also displayed elements of the more extreme “path with a heart” in that they appeared to feel that “the things that [they] can now or potentially could do with excellence, which are fulfilling in the doing of them, so fulfilling that [they] also get paid to do them, it feels not like compensation, but like a gift” (Shepard, 1984, p.26). Interviewees displayed this “path with a heart” (Shepard, 1984) by stating that they were very satisfied with their careers at Majesté as it provided fun, enjoyment and fulfilment.

The concept of enjoyment and fun at work was often displayed in our interviewees. When asked how their jobs were perceived, we received comments such as:

*“I love my job.” (Manager)*

*“When you get up, you don’t get that feeling, oh, do I have to go to work today  
You actually want to go to work, you know that it’s going to be a good day.”  
(Graduate)*

Having a career that was ultimately fulfilling was of particular importance to one interviewee. She left Majesté and accepted a substantial decrease in salary in order to work with something that she loved:

*“Career is about being good at something that I love to do-so that is why I could not stay with Majesté, because I didn’t love it. I wasn’t passionate for it at all, and I wanted to do something that I thought I really should be doing.” (Former consultant)*

Personal fulfilment was also used to evaluate interviewees’ success at Majesté. Two interviewees stated:

*“It is most important that I am enjoying working, instead of going the fastest way to the top.” (Analyst)*

*“The most important thing for me is feeling like I make a difference in a meaningful way.” (Consultant)*

Fulfilment and meaning for interviewees do not only come from their careers as a whole, but also from elements of their career, for example, the extracurricular activities that Majesté employees take part in outside of their official client work. These activities can include corporate citizenship events, amongst others.

One employee stated that the reason she initially joined Majesté was that they offered these extracurricular activities, and they were important to her:

*“What made me apply to Majesté was because they had a very strong corporate citizenship area, which I’m extremely interested in. I want to be involved in corporate citizenship; I want people to think it’s important.” (Consultant)*

This indicates that although it is to some extent expected of her to take part in these activities, she does so as she enjoys it and believes in it. Thus, interviewees found their careers, and elements of their careers such as extracurricular activities, fun, meaningful and fulfilling; these characteristics can be considered a “path with a heart” (Shepard, 1984).

Although many employees appear to be driven by protean values, some still seemed to be driven by more traditional values, such as pay, rank and status (Maguire, 2002; Baruch, 2004; Cabrera, 2009).

“Status” seemed to be a recurring theme throughout the interviews. The same consultant who stated that *“the most important thing for me is feeling like I make a difference in a meaningful way”* also mentioned that:

*“It is important to have a job where you get well paid, and where you get a good status...it’s a job that many people apply for and I am happy to have it for that reason.” (Consultant)*

He went on to mention that the reason for joining Majesté was the status of the brand:

*“I joined them because they were a really great firm...and a good brand.”(Consultant)*

Another graduate who had earlier expressed being driven by protean values also mentioned traditional values by referring to the importance of status and climbing the corporate ladder:

*“When you tell people you are working at Majesté, it seems like they get a new image of you.” (Graduate)*

*“My view of career is quite traditional, with different hierarchical structures.” (Graduate)*

It appeared that pay, in the form of overtime pay, was very important to some interviewees. As opposed to one consultant, who stated that she took part in extracurricular activities as she found it fulfilling, one particular consultant stated an entirely different reason for his involvement:

*“For me it didn’t really make a big difference if I had to be involved in the Christmas Lunch Committee, for example. I knew that my extra hours would be paid for and yes, I would say I was very active for that reason.” (Former Consultant)*

Beyond extracurricular activities, the same consultant stated that he worked long hours for the same reason: pay.

*“I really, really want to work hard for at least a couple of years and I am not joining Majesté because I want to go home at 4 o’clock in the afternoon. So for me, it is just to do the work and yes okay I am working a little bit more...but then it is also this thing that I would be paid overtime.” (Former Consultant)*

Pay would also motivate interviewees to leave Majesté:

*“I would accept another job offer if they offered me twice the money.” (Consultant)*

Furthermore, many employees expressed that they valued the way that the promotion system and thus “rank” was handled at Majesté. It became evident that there was a strict hierarchical structure and pre-determined career path which affected their development:

*“We need to have progression in our careers.” (Consultant)*

*“Majesté has a very clear career path, and you’re actually pushed to go to the next level, and take on greater levels of responsibility throughout your work.”  
(Consultant)*

As shown above, there are certainly some individuals that are driven by protean values of psychological success and a “path with a heart” (Shepard, 1984). These values also provide guidance for how individuals assess their success. However, it is evident that certainly not all interviewees are driven by the same values. We have shown that certain contradictions and/or inconsistencies exist in the employees’ values; they claim they are motivated by individual, protean values of success however, many interviewees at the same time imply or actually state that traditional values motivate them. The implications of these findings are discussed in section five.

We have argued that an individual may be driven by protean or traditional values. However, we question the origin of these traditional values – in that the individual may have acquired them as a result of the influence of the organisation. As we have previously pointed out, organisational values are still largely aligned with traditional values of pay, rank and status (Crane & Matten, 2007). Ideally, a protean career attitude assumes that an individual is values-driven in that their career is driven by their own personal, protean values; a less protean career-oriented individual will be more likely to be influenced by organisational (traditional) values (Briscoe et al., 2006). Therefore, individuals who appear to be motivated by traditional values may have been so due to the influence of the organisation. A brief explanation of why this may be so will now be offered.

During the interviews, we noticed that Majesté seemed to influence many different aspects of our interviewees’ lives, not just their careers. They did so by catering for areas and interests that would usually be pursued in the private sphere, for example, meeting one’s life partner, socialising/making friends, taking part in hobbies and community activities, and travelling.

Given this sphere of influence, individuals may have experienced a “blurring of values,” in that their protean values eroded and they began to be more influenced by traditional, organisational values. The spheres of influence in our interviewees’ lives that Majesté pervaded will be explored to highlight the reasons for this blurring of values:

A staggeringly high number (five out of the twelve) of our interviewees met their husbands/wives and or long-term boyfriends/girlfriends at Majesté. A former consultant explains how she met her future husband at a Scandinavian Majesté conference:

*”Well, (when I met him for the first time at the conference) the first screening had already been done. I knew he probably had good grades, he’d be a positive person, I knew he had a good job, I knew he had a lot of ambition, and the only thing I needed to check was if he was cute, and if he likes me, and then everything is settled, and so, it’s better than a dating agency really! But it is super common to meet each other at Majesté.” (Former Consultant)*

As well as meeting a life partner, Majesté also offers an environment, similar to a friendship group, where employees (of similar ages and interests) can make friends and participate in social activities. A manager confirmed how this “social group” has kept her at the company:

*“The social part of it [the company] was what attracted me to Majesté because there are a lot of young people and it seemed like there was a lot of social activities which was true as I found out later...the reason why I am still in Majesté is the people and the social part of it.” (Manager)*

Another consultant confirms how her whole social life is dominated by Majesté, and why:

*“I’ve lived with people from Majesté, 6 of my best friends come from Majesté, my husband’s from Majesté and that happens because we are all so similar.” (Consultant)*

Considering the work and travel demands placed on consultants whilst at projects, they are also able to pursue regular hobbies through Majesté, for example, one consultant explains:

*“We play sports when we are away (at projects). And we have this Majesté club where we have a lot of other sports and stuff that we can do” (Consultant)*

If a consultant is interested in community service, Majesté also caters for this. A consultant who is very active in outreach projects described a role she currently has:

*“We meet lots of youth, as part of Majesté’s skills to succeed programme. A lot of these kids have problems, come from difficult background, so I hope that we can inspire them to study, to find work, to have the skills to do that.” (Consultant)*

Majesté also offers the opportunity to pursue one’s interest in travel. One consultant points out:

*”Working on different projects...one week I’m in Paris, and the next I’m in Sweden, visiting my boyfriend. I love to travel...work allows me to do that.” (Consultant)*

Through Majesté, employees can even combine their interest in travel with their interest in community activities. One manager explains:

*“What I would like to do one day is to go and work in Tanzania. You choose a developing country and spend half a year or whatever there [through Majesté]” (Consultant)*

Majesté not only caters for aspects of a person’s life, but some consultants are actually not able to, or do not want to, separate work from life. When asked about work-life balance, one consultant stated:

*”I don’t really like that work-life balance word, because I think that work is such a big part of life.” (Consultant)*

When asked if he lived to work, or worked to live, another consultant stated:

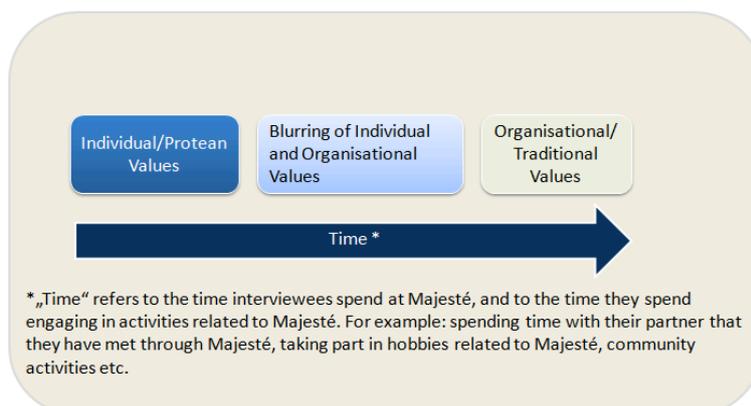
*”Well, I guess there’s nothing in between? Mmm, no, but in that case, it’s live in order to work. No, but really, I choose that actually, because if I just wanted to do what I needed to do to make a living...then I don’t think I’d do what I do, so no, that’s my choice.” (Consultant)*

Finally, when asked about his values and indeed, corporate identity, one new graduate told us that:

*”I don’t think I’ve really worked up my corporate self, just yet, maybe with time, it might happen.” (Graduate)*

We interpret this to then mean that a corporate self, and organisational values, are something that exert more and more of an influence on individuals over “time”. “Time” refers to the more time they spend at the organisation actually performing their work tasks (i.e. not achieving a work-life balance) and the more time they spend at activities associated with the organisation (i.e. Majesté community activities or hobbies, or spending time with their Majesté friends or partner). As the organisation caters for numerous parts of an individual’s life usually reserved for outside of work, there is an infinite amount of “time” that an employee can thus spend at Majesté. Thus, the more “time” an individual spends at the organisation, the more likely they are to experience a blurring of individual and organisational values as career dominates all aspects of their life. Figure 1 illustrates this phenomenon. This blurring of values cannot be explained by the protean career metaphor.

**Figure 1: The Blurring of Individual Values into Organisational Values over “Time”**



The implications of the blurring of individual values into organisational values over “time” will be explored more in the discussion. The next sub-section addresses self-directedness amongst our interviewees.

### 4.3 Self-Directedness

This section demonstrates how consultants appeared to be self-directed, in that their career is driven by them, personally, as opposed to the organisation. In driving their career, they show independence and control over it. Flexibility and adaptability in their approach to their career, an important part of self-directedness in career management, are also explored.

Many consultants explicitly expressed that they drove their career in general terms, for example:

*“I am responsible for my own career, but of course I need the help from the company.” (Analyst)*

*“I think it’s kind of up to me what I want to do with my future.” (Graduate)*

Another graduate spoke of driving his career in terms of his own development, which Majesté greatly assisted him with:

*“Majesté is a good organisation because they take care of you, they help you develop your skills, they help you educate yourself, so you get quite a lot of opportunity to develop yourself and get new experience, and well it’s good to be so involved in your own career.” (Graduate)*

Driving one’s career also implies choice over a number of different elements of it. Many analysts and consultants discussed choices available to them, and also that they would be personally responsible for making the decisions that affected their career. One consultant discussed her choice to leave the company if she was no longer satisfied with the work:

*“If I don’t get what I want here, then I’ll go and find it somewhere else...I will give as much as I get, and if I don’t feel like I can do that then I will change [jobs].” (Consultant)*

Within Majesté, consultants are able to choose between two distinct career paths: they can either move from analyst, to consultant then to manager and beyond, implying that they receive more managerial responsibility and responsibility for selling work at each level, or they can choose to become an “expert” in a certain area, which does not involve management responsibilities. Consultants agreed that which path to choose was entirely up to them, in that:

*“We have those different paths – it’s not really up-or-out, it’s more like a choice you make what kind of career you want to have.” (Manager)*

Another analyst confirmed that the choice between the two career paths is entirely up to the individual in that the lateral career path choice is considered equally as respected as the upwards one:

*“You can put more focus on being a specialist, so you are still moving forward, but you are not moving upward...you don’t have to move upwards to succeed.” (Consultant)*

A consultant explained that even beyond the two career paths, employees were able to move across or “try” different areas of the business:

*“You get to try a lot...and see what path suits you. If you don’t think [technology consulting] is fun then you can say ‘okay I want to be in management consulting instead, so I try that’ and so on.” (Consultant)*

Many consultants explained how they had choice over the number of hours they would work, in that:

*“I have quite a big degree of control over it, if I need to go home earlier one day, then that’s no problem.” (Analyst)*

*“So I think it’s really flexible and it’s your own choice how much you want to spend at work and outside of work.” (Manager)*

Thus, interviewees displayed self-directedness in that they drove their career, and were able to exercise choice in a number of different elements of it, such as whether to stay with the company, what career path and area of the business to choose, and how many hours they worked.

An important aspect of a self-directed career in management consulting is the ability to influence one's ratings and success (in terms of promotions).<sup>2</sup> Consultants claim to be able to influence important aspects of their ratings, including the projects they get assigned to, their involvement in extracurricular activities, and their ability to set their own objectives and negotiate their own performance reviews.

Some consultants stated that they were able to influence which projects they were assigned to through a mediating process with different members of the organisation:

*"We do have a choice, I mean, it's an on-going discussion with HR and your counsellor and so on, but of course, you will say what you want and they will try to do it." (Analyst)*

A graduate also professed that Majesté does at all times respects their employees' preferences in terms of projects, travel etc.:

*"During the meeting with your team leaders and staff you can always say that you are either up for travelling or not, and they really respect that you're not into travelling, then we can put you on another project, because the range of projects is huge." (Graduate)*

A former consultant professed that the allocation of projects is in fact entirely up to the individual, and is a consequence of their networking skills; with the organisation playing virtually no role in it:

*"And then it all comes down to, or goes back to, how does Majesté staff projects? And if you ask the HR department and if you read all the materials then you say that it is HR who is actually putting people on the different projects. But in real*

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<sup>2</sup> Although promotion is associated with rank and hence with more traditional evaluations of success, it still signifies forward advancement and hence is an important element of career in which consultants claim to have control.

*life they have nothing to do with it. In real life it is all about networking.”*  
(Former consultant)

A current consultant supported this view, but expressed animosity towards it:

*“[In order to get the best projects] it’s really important to network, network, network, and I hate that word, hate, hate it, hate it.”* (Consultant)

Consultants discussed that they could not only influence what project they were assigned to, but if they were assigned to one and they were unhappy, they could always request to change. An analyst describes a situation whereby he was dissatisfied with his current project and he immediately approached his career counsellor, who rectified the situation:

*“[With this particular project] it was very difficult...but I approached my career counsellor and said the situation isn’t good right now...then she resolved the situation...so I think that Majesté did make sure the situation changed, yeah.”*  
(Analyst)

Thus, we interpret that consultants are able to influence the projects that they are assigned to, through their discussions with HR, and through their own networking skills. They also claim that they are able to be taken off a project should they be dissatisfied.

When working at Majesté, consultants can participate in extracurricular and social activities, outside of their client work. Consultants claim that they are able to choose whether to be involved, and to what degree, in these activities. An analyst discussed his participation in these activities:

*“[You can choose] to do recruiting or work within Majesté club, but, I’m not sure actually how much [doing that kind of thing] matters. At the moment I just wouldn’t have time.”* (Analyst)

Another analyst discussed the degree to which people could get involved in such activities:

*“I think it’s positive to be seen to be contributing...but I’m not sure how much of a plus it is if you, say, have 10 activities where you are helping the company...it’s really just up to you, what you want to do.”* (Analyst)

A consultant also discussed the reasons that people participated in these kinds of activities:

*“Some people just enjoy [that kind of thing]. It doesn’t matter so much for promotions.” (Consultant)*

Despite the importance of networking, employees at Majesté are also able to choose whether to participate in social activities:

*“At the end of the day, if you don’t show up to a summer party or an after-work then no one will care.” (Consultant)*

Thus, the interviewees profess that they are free to choose whether they want to, and the degree to which they choose to involve themselves in non-project activities, depending on their time pressures and degree of interest in these activities.

Another aspect of career that consultants claimed to be able to influence was the actual feedback and promotion process, whereby they set their own objectives, and were able to engage in dialogue about their feedback, thus influencing their actual rating. In terms of generally getting feedback, both in the formal promotion system and outside of it, a consultant and a manager both discussed how the Majesté structure supported constant feedback and easy-going relations with management:

*“Even though we have a career path, it is quite flat. I can ask both managers and senior managers about how I’m doing.” (Consultant)*

*“You don’t have a lot of hierarchy. It’s really easy going when it comes to that.” (Manager)*

Employees were also ultimately in charge of their ranking in that they set their own goals, and were able to negotiate their feedback. A consultant explains:

*“You set your own objectives...then you give self-input as to what you have done for your objectives and targets and then you get feedback.” (Consultant)*

If you perceive the feedback and the rating to be unfair, ultimately you are able to challenge it, as a consultant points out:

*“You can always discuss your ratings with your manager and career counsellor. Your career counsellor can go and ask why you got that feedback. If you are not happy with your feedback, your career counsellor can support you.” (Consultant)*

Another consultant actually succeeded in getting her feedback changed:

*“I really disagreed with what he said, so I told him, and I told him why, and then there were some discussions, and he changed it.” (Consultant)*

Thus, consultants claim to be able to influence the feedback and promotion process as there is a “flat” structure in terms of communication with management, and consultants are being able to set and give their input into whether they achieved their objectives. They also claim to be able to challenge the ratings they are given.

The final aspect in the “self-directed” criteria for a protean career is the ability to be flexible and adaptable to different facets of a consultant’s career and in different life stages and circumstances. Consultants demonstrate that they are flexible and adaptable in being able to cope with constant change, and being able to constantly manage their work-life balance and other important aspects of their career and life. Consultants also show that they can be adaptable to different life situations, i.e. when having children.

An analyst discusses the importance of adaptability in the constantly changing consultancy environment, in that:

*“We are told at the beginning that your world will constantly be changing, you will always be part of a change process, the team members you work with will change very rapidly, and you will have to adapt...it’s something you are encouraged to thrive on.” (Analyst)*

A consultant describes how he needs to be, and can be flexible about where he works, and how he manages his work-life balance accordingly.

*“You need to be flexible...there are no clear expectations whether I should be in Finland now, five days this week or two...I manage this myself, to get a balance I feel comfortable with...the work, the travel, and other parts of life.” (Consultant)*

Another consultant discusses how she needs to adapt to the needs of different client, of different ages, on different projects:

*“The dynamics vary a lot, sometimes you have a good relationship with your client, sometimes you are just not the same people...because they don't like what you are doing, and you're just annoying, and you're younger...but as a consultant they pay you, so you just have to do it.” (Consultant)*

Therefore, we interpret that consultants appear to display flexibility and adaptability in their approach to career, in being able to manage constant change, manage their work-life balance and travel requirements, and also manage different clients and project situations.

Given the relatively high demands in consulting, consultants also need to be adaptable and flexible when their life situation changes, for example, when they have children. We observed many examples of this. A consultant who has one small child and was expecting her second explained how the change in her life circumstances had required her to be even more flexible:

*“I think [consulting and having children] is challenging from the point of view that you might have to split up the way you are working as you did before...you have to be a little more flexible.” (Consultant)*

She goes on to discuss how she has adapted her life and working habits to suit her new family:

*“Now [since I've had children] I work in the morning whilst she is at day-care, then I pick her up and play with her, put her to bed at 7pm, and thereafter I continue working. Sometimes you can also work from the office so you do not need to be at the client every day.” (Consultant)*

Employees with children appear to be adaptable and flexible in that they can adjust their working habits and hours around their family.

We interpret that interviewees display protean qualities in that they claim they are able to influence their career and career path, as well as different aspects of the promotion process. They also appear to demonstrate other protean qualities, for example, being flexible and adaptable in terms of their approach to the changing consultancy environment and to different life stages. Having discussed the attributes of “values-driven” and “self-directedness”, we now discuss how the individual perceives the organisation to influence their career.

#### **4.4 The Organisation’s Influence on Career Management**

The final theme that emerged from our analysis was the “organisation’s influence on career management”. This part of the analysis is divided into three sub-themes, namely the organisation being perceived to limit the employees’ freedom in managing their own careers, the perceived level of bureaucracy at Majesté and the interviewees’ perceptions of the extracurricular activities.

A number of contradictions arose in the area of career management; that is, whether the individual or the organisation manages the career. Our interviewees claim that they are the ones that manage their own careers, however, they have also shown that they experience limitations in this area. In contradiction to our findings presented above, many interviewees indicate restrictions in their freedom of choice regarding projects. One ex-consultant, for example, tells her story of not having been able to influence the project that she was assigned to:

*“I think it was the choices, because you can’t choose projects you want to be on, and you can’t choose for how long, and you can’t choose, for example, where, in which city, etc.” (Former consultant)*

The interviewee expresses her disappointment and frustration about the project allocation. The project did not meet her expectations in terms of what she applied for when joining Majesté:

*“They sent me on a one person mission, and it’s not a lot of fun, sitting on your own, at a big client site, outside the city, so I just felt that I didn’t get what I applied for.” (Former consultant)*

Consequently she illustrates the difference between the expectations that were set by Majesté and what she experienced:

*“They set expectations way too high. They said, you will have the opportunity to work for different clients, in different industries, you will have the opportunity to work with different people, and you will be a part of a team. And I just did not get any of that, because I had to work on my own or I could work in a team, but the team was two people, or three people, including me. I only got to see two different industries and two different clients in two and a half years...I felt stuck. It got worse, and I just could not find a way out of it.” (Former consultant)*

This quote emphasises that the organisation influences, and appears to ultimately decide, what projects consultants get assigned to. Two other interviewees also claim that there is the possibility of being stuck at a project for a long time even though the company promises them variety in their work:

*“So the kind of work you do as an analyst is really anything, you can be on a project for two years doing exactly the same thing.” (Consultant)*

*“Some people can stay on the same client their entire career” (Former consultant)*

Therefore, it appears that consultants have little influence on their project choice. This can be an issue as the type of project can affect an employee’s performance, their ratings, and ultimately promotions, and perceptions of career success. This problem is illustrated by the following quote:

*“Yeah, I know that in my last project it wasn’t a good fix so I think I couldn’t do my best. If you have a project with a lot of problems...you know, that the client is dissatisfied and everyone is grumpy, I guess that affects ratings even though you really put in hard work.” (Consultant)*

It must be noted, however, that the level of influence over one's own career management depends on the time of employment at the company. It is not surprising that new employees at the beginning of their career need to adapt and accept whichever project they get assigned to:

*"I just want to start working, and get a feeling about what I want to do...so from now, I'm just going to go with what they tell me, and work with that, and then I'll see what will happen." (Graduate)*

*"You don't have as much choice from the beginning, because you are new." (Manager)*

Some interviewees also mention face time, a phenomena that they experienced during their projects which affected their freedom in managing their own career. "Face time" is explained by the following quote:

*"They [the clients] were paying me to be there, and even though I didn't have a lot to do at that moment, I had to sit there and have, what we call "face time". They had to see me." (Former consultant)*

The phenomenon of "face time" limiting an interviewee's freedom is illustrated by the following quote:

*"I asked: 'please can I leave this, I don't want to be here, I don't have anything to do', but they were like: 'No, you have to stay, because you can't be not staffed.'" (Former consultant)*

Another ex-consultant discusses the age difference between graduates in the United States as opposed to graduates in Scandinavia and how this can affect freedom in managing career. When he started as an analyst at Majesté at the age of 28, he had to conform to a position description that was allegedly created for a typical 22-year-old American graduate in the same position. According to him, the level of difficulty had therefore been lowered to the lowest common denominator; as a result he was not challenged. He then experienced complications in managing his career as he was told to simply adapt to the level of difficulty instead of the level of difficulty adapting to him:

*“And I mean even career counsellors in Denmark, they tell you up front: ‘Okay go there, have a good time, make sure to go to the bar in the evenings and don’t worry about the level of difficulty’, because [the level of difficulty] is not high. I mean, they [Majesté] have to find a level that kind of is the lowest common denominator. So I would say that is a bit sad that it is just a one-size-fits-all.”*  
(Former consultant)

Furthermore, career management seems to be driven by the organisation in terms of the economic circumstances. The following quote of a former consultant reveals how the global financial crisis led to a shift of influence in career management from the individual to the organisation:

*“During the financial crisis when business was not going well, even though people were doing extremely well and got extremely good ratings they would still not be promoted, because management says ‘Well, the company is not going so well, so we cannot really promote people’... But it’s not as performance-based as you would have hoped for.”* (Former consultant)

Another consultant refers to the problem of redundancy that evolved as a consequence of the global financial crisis. Although the individual loses the control over their career management within the company if they take the redundancy; as the following quote shows, it seems that the employees have at least a say in accepting their redundancy:

*“And they were trying to get rid of people as well, during the recession, so they offered me a redundancy, and I took it.”* (Consultant)

Beyond economic circumstances, interviewees may have experienced limited freedom in managing their own careers due to the perceived level of bureaucracy, hierarchy, and strict rules and career paths at Majesté. As one interviewee explains:

*“It is a huge battle, kind of towards this huge castle of bureaucracy.”* (Former consultant)

When asking one consultant about his least favourite characteristic of Majesté, he refers to the bureaucracy and its effects:

*“I think in large it’s maybe a little bit bureaucratic. There are a lot of procedures that stop having innovative things going through. I think sometimes there are too many bureaucratic procedures.” (Consultant)*

As the interviewees mention, these bureaucratic and hierarchical structures can have effects on several aspects of career management. For example, a former employee refers to the effects on the career model:

*“Majesté can also seem like a very stiff company or bureaucratic company as well, because they have a very very defined career model.” (Former consultant)*

As the interviewee points out, the career path is defined as follows:

*“So that first you would work 2 years as an analyst and then you would be 3 years a consultant, then you would be 3 years a manager and then 3 years as a senior manager and then you might end up becoming a senior executive. There are more steps above that as well.” (Former consultant)*

There seem to be strict specifications as to when an employee can be promoted:

*“It’s very strict on the performance side, it’s very set in stone how it all works, it’s extremely well defined down to the granule.” (Consultant)*

*“There are very standard ways of doing things, and here [at Majesté] especially, it takes even longer to get through those levels.” (Consultant)*

The career structures appear to quite rigid; although Majesté is performance-oriented it is unclear whether outstanding performance could lead to early promotion. As a former consultant explains, he tried to get promoted earlier than the specified time, but he was told to wait until he passed the two years requirement. This led to poor motivation since he could not move at the pace he wanted:

*“I found it was extremely hard to actually break out these defined boxes and for me that was kind of demotivating as well... it was extremely difficult to actually do*

*something yourself, because you are basically being told 'Okay you have to wait for 2 years and then you can get promoted' ” (Former consultant)*

Just as consultants may not get promoted ahead of time, it is perceived that taking longer than the required time is also not acceptable. Majesté attempts to control this process through the “up-or-out” culture:

*“If you don’t [advance according to the given time frames], you’re out, and you are well aware of that system, and you know that already from the beginning.”*  
(Graduate)

Majesté also seems to have a considerable influence on the individuals’ career management in terms of the time that they invest in work. As the following quotes demonstrate, Majesté influences the number of working hours of the employees:

*“They are really, really strict with your hours” (Graduate)*

*“I was being told in the very beginning by my boss that ‘I don’t want you to work more than 45 hours a week’” (Former consultant)*

As Majesté is an American company with headquarters in the United States, the level of bureaucracy and hierarchy is aggravated by the fact that decisions are made centrally. One interviewee expresses his frustration with restrictions that are placed on decision-making in the smaller offices:

*“Especially working at a quite small office which Denmark is, it is sometimes very frustrating to see that decisions are being taken by the United States which is by no means good for the Danish office.” (Former Consultant)*

In contradiction to the findings in the “self-directed” part of the analysis above, Majesté is perceived to in fact limit interviewee’s freedom in their career management through project allocation and subsequent ratings, the phenomena of “face time” and also economic circumstances. Their freedom is perceived to be further limited by the strict hierarchy, defined career path and bureaucracy within Majesté.

The last part of this section presents findings that indicate how an employee's career management is also influenced by the extracurricular activities; the same ones that some interviewees previously claimed to be able to choose to participate in. The involvement in extracurricular activities at Majesté seems to play an important role and many interviewees see the expectations of involvement in these activities as an unwanted pressure:

*“And that part is really annoying, the extracurricular activities: have you organised parties, have you been the social at this? It's not just ‘have you’...it's ‘what have you done?’” (Consultant)*

*“With those activities, there is the feeling of always being assessed, and always feeling like you have to deliver something, that you have to make sure people see that you are contributing.” (Consultant)*

Involvement in extracurricular activities can become all-encompassing, one consultant even claims:

*“If you are working for Majesté, you can get married to Majesté!” (Manager)*

Thus, we interpret that, on the whole, interviewees at Majesté do not strictly follow a protean career. Some interviewees certainly show elements of it, in that they are driven by their own values, thus achieving psychological success and pursuing a “path with a heart” (Shepard, 1984; Hall, 1996). Other interviewees, however, appeared to be more driven by traditional values, such as pay, rank and status (Maguire, 2002; Baruch, 2004; Carbrera, 2008). These traditional (organisational) values may have emerged as a result of the influence of Majesté. Majesté influenced areas of our interviewees' private lives, thus career became intertwined with their life and they may not have been able to separate their own protean values from organisational (traditional) values. This blurring of values is not covered by the protean concept. Furthermore, the interviewees claimed to be self-directed in that they could exercise choice over aspects of their career, for example, the direction it would take, the promotion process, and their involvement in extracurricular activities. They also appeared to be flexible and adaptable in their approach to their career; which is important in a protean career (Hall, 1996). Although consultants claimed to be self-directed, however, their ability to manage their own career was restricted by the strict hierarchy, bureaucracy and defined career paths at

Majesté. This restriction on individual's freedom can also not be explained by the protean career metaphor. The next section thoroughly discusses the implications of these findings and revises the concept of protean career.

## **5. Analysis: Discussion**

In this section we will discuss the most prominent “mysteries” that emerged from our empirical material on a higher level of theoretical abstraction (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). We begin by discussing how our interviewees displayed many inconsistencies in their values, in that they were driven by protean values and traditional values. We also explain the convergence of an individual's protean values with organisational (traditional) values, and the implications of this in relation to the concept of normative control; a phenomenon that we believed to have witnessed (Etzioni, 1961). We, thereafter, discuss what we term “illusions of career control”; the idea that the interviewees claimed they were self-directed and hence in control of their career. However, that they also perceived the organisation to be a controlling force in career management. We conclude by suggesting certain shortcomings for the protean career metaphor and proposing a new metaphor.

### **5.1 Inconsistent Values**

Most interviewees did, at some point, claim that they were driven by more protean values, for example, freedom and growth, even if they later contradicted themselves. Many interviewees mentioned values that were consistent with a “path with a heart” and psychological success (Shephard, 1984; Hall, 1996) in that they were driven by enjoyment, fulfilment and the feeling that they were making a valuable contribution to society through areas such as corporate citizenship projects. Furthermore, happiness, meaning in work, as well as freedom, autonomy, growth and development were considered to be motivating factors for career success. Protean values can hence be perceived to play at least some part in driving our interviewees.

Inconsistencies and confusion around what values really drove them did appear rampant amongst our interviewees. Consultants would almost simultaneously mention both protean values and traditional values, such as pay rank, and status, as motivators for them. Inconsistencies that were noted included: an analyst who wanted to make a difference in a meaningful way, but at the same time took the job at Majesté as it was well paid and afforded

him a good status, and a former consultant who left Majesté due to the bureaucracy and hierarchical structures as he believed they didn't give him enough freedom and growth opportunities, however at the same time he mentioned that he valued overtime pay above all else. Due to the influence of the organisation, some individuals may have developed more traditional (organisational) values, in combination with protean values.

These inconsistencies allow us to question whether employees at Majesté are really protean. While they may desire to be protean or indeed believe that they are; hierarchical organisational structures may not support this (Gasteiger & Briscoe, 2007). Although interviewees may highly value freedom and growth, this growth may only be possible within the tightly defined career path system. Therefore, although an individual may want to solely focus on their personal values, the influence of the organisation in terms of structures and defined careers paths does not allow this.

## **5.2 Normative Control**

Individuals experience a blurring of protean values into organisational values over time, due to the influence that Majesté not only has on their careers, but also on their lives. The way that Majesté influences the careers of its employees is similar to the concept of normative control. Normative control was pioneered by Amitai Etzioni (1961). It has been extensively discussed in the literature since its inception (Edward, 1979; Barley & Kunda, 1992; Kunda, 1992; Das & Teng, 1998; Das & Teng, 2001). Etzioni (1961) suggested that there was a shift between the traditional form of control, through rules and regulations, to a behavioural control. According to Kunda (1992), "normative control is the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings to guide their actions (...)". Thus, employees feel that they "owe not only a hard day's work to the corporation but also their demeanour and affections" (Edwards, 1979, p.148). Employees are further motivated to serve the organisation as they "driven by internal commitment, strong identification with company goals and intrinsic satisfaction from work" (p.11). This is evoked through a variety of managerial actions (Kunda, 1992). We found that normative control was certainly evoked by Majesté.

Majesté is perceived to exert normative control by catering for other parts of our interviewees' lives, parts that would usually remain in the private sphere, for example, finding

a life partner, socialising, travelling, hobbies and community involvement. Interviewees thus experienced a “blurring of values” in that they cannot readily separate work from life, and their individual protean values merge into organisational (traditional) values. This is in contrast to the idea of the protean career, as it is expected that the person is aware of their values and brings them to the company (Briscoe et al., 1996). There also appears to be an inverse relationship between the amount of time an individual spends at Majesté (in terms of work-life balance, meeting a partner at Majesté and spending time with them) and the erosion of an individual’s values, to be replaced by organisational values. We interpret this as an intelligent strategy by the organisation as “the best use of human capital occurs when the organisation is aligned as close as possible to the motivations of the workforce” (Vuuren et al., 2008, p.47). Whereas a protean career-oriented individual would usually influence their career, we see in the case of Majesté that the organisation is shaping and influencing the person, thus exerting some level of normative control.

“Mysteries” that have emerged in the course of our analysis are values inconsistency and values convergence amongst interviewees. In terms of values inconsistency, many interviewees claimed to be influenced by protean values, however, at the same time mentioned traditional values as motivators for them. In regard to values convergence, interviewees, after spending considerable “time” at Majesté, appear to experience a blurring of their own values into organisational values; a phenomenon that we have explained through the concept of normative control. Neither of these phenomena would be expected nor could be explained by the concept of protean career.

### **5.3 Illusion of Career Control**

Another “mystery” that we discovered was what we term the “illusion of career control” amongst our interviewees. The individual’s career at Majesté does not seem to be only directed by the individual as would be expected in a protean career (Hall, 1976; Hall, 1996; Hall & Moss, 1998; Hall, 2004; Briscoe et al., 2006), but also by the organisation. As discussed in the literature review, self-directedness, and the associated assumptions of management of one’s own career and the choices within it, is an important aspect of protean career (Hall, 2002; Niles et al., 2002; Baruch, 2004; Briscoe et al., 2006). Under these assumptions, an individual will feel personal responsibility for all successes and failures within their career, and also feel as if they are able to move in and out of a company should

they not be satisfied (Briscoe et al., 2006). The organisation influences almost all facets of our interviewees' career, however, most interviewees appeared to be unaware of this, hence our title "the illusion of career control". This phenomenon is explained below.

To highlight these "illusions", areas in which interviewees claimed to be in control of their career are now explored. Firstly, it does not appear that the projects, their locations and duration can be as easily chosen as claimed by several interviewees. These interviewees maintained that project allocation was a product of one's own initiative, discussions with HR, or networking activities, which allegedly lead to the organisation respecting the employee's preferences. Instead, employees at Majesté have to participate in projects that are assigned to them, even if this is not in their best interest. Moreover, the influence of the American headquarters is strong; the job descriptions seem to be determined by the headquarters, and employees worldwide are forced to adapt. For example, as pointed out by a former employee, the role of a much older Scandinavian graduate would be the same as that of a younger US graduate; even though they may be very different. The career management of an individual is, therefore, also limited by such decisions on roles and responsibilities. In order to have a protean career, it would be necessary for the individual to be able to influence the project allocation, as the project type influences one's performance, as well as the subsequent ratings and promotion opportunities, thus ultimately one's career. Since this does not seem to be the case at Majesté, individuals cannot be said to be ultimately self-directed and hence protean (Hall, 1976; Hall, 1996; Hall & Moss, 1998; Hall, 2004; Briscoe et al., 2006).

Interviewees also appeared to have "illusions of career control" in regards to the promotion process. Some interviewees suggested that they could influence this process by setting their own objectives and being able to negotiate their feedback and ratings. Negotiations are possible due to the "easy-going" relationship with management and the flat hierarchy. However, these assertions must be questioned since many interviewees also claimed that the promotion system was rigid, and hence limiting, in regards to the career advancement, and that a strict hierarchy and bureaucracy existed at Majesté. Interviewees claimed that Majesté was a "huge castle of bureaucracy" where the performance system is "extremely well defined down to the granule". An employee cannot be promoted earlier than is specified by this career path, nor can they be promoted later, due to the "up-or-out" culture. Structures that limit an individual's freedom in this way would not fit with the ideal protean organisation; in that an organisation must be dynamic, non-controlling and flexible in order to allow individuals to be

protean and to manage their own career (Gasteiger & Briscoe, 2007, p.2) Limitations on the promotion process and career paths severely puts boundaries on an individual's freedom in managing their career.

The final "illusion of career control" surfaced in regard to interviewees' participation in extracurricular activities. In a protean career, individuals have the freedom to make choices which affect their career (Briscoe & Hall, 1996; Gasteiger & Briscoe, 2007). Some interviewees claim that they do have a choice in whether or not to participate in extracurricular activities, and to what extent. Yet interviewees simultaneously express the disturbance that they experience from the "need" to get involved in extracurricular activities and the constant assessment that they are subject to: not getting involved or not getting involved enough in these extracurricular activities is seen by some interviewees as disadvantageous to their career. We, therefore, interpret again that career management at Majesté and making choices with regards to career management is not entirely in the hands of the individuals.

In conclusion, our interpretations of the empirical material have shown that two major "mysteries" emerged from our empirical material; that of "values inconsistencies" and the "illusion of career control". These mysteries cannot be explained by the concept of protean career. Our interviewees showed value inconsistencies, in that they were driven by protean, as well as traditional (organisational) values. Individuals may have been influenced by organisational values and hence experienced a blurring of values, due largely to normative control that was exerted through influencing not just the individual's career, but their life. Our interviewees also experienced illusions of career control in that they believed they were self-directed, however, Majesté ultimately controlled their career. Therefore, the protean metaphor cannot be said to wholly describe the career experience of our interviewees at Majesté. The next part of the discussion section proposes a new metaphor.

#### **5.4 Theoretical Contribution: Development of the New Metaphor of "Black Jack"**

The above two sections of our discussion have highlighted that the protean metaphor does not describe the career experience of our interviewees at Majesté. In this section we develop a new metaphor which does reflect their experiences. The metaphor we propose is that of the game of "Black Jack". This metaphor incorporates the ideas of individuals being "values-

driven” and “self-directed” as our findings suggest they are. It will also include elements which demonstrate the restrictions that prevent individuals from fully experiencing the protean freedom that the particular metaphor elucidates. This new metaphor is thoroughly explained below.

In order to explain how the Black Jack metaphor describes the career situation, it is important to briefly explain how the game operates. The game of Black Jack is usually played in a controlled environment, for example, a casino. Monetary bets are often placed; with the goal of the game being to win a greater amount of money than placed in the original bet. Players are dealt two cards by a dealer, and the dealer also receives two cards, one of which he turns face up for rest of the players to see. The players then have the option of receiving a third card. The purpose of the game is to have a higher total card value than the dealer, while not exceeding a total value of 21. Within the Black Jack metaphor, we propose that the players are akin to our interviewees, the Black Jack dealer represents management, the “game” represents their career, and the casino represents the organisation, Majesté,

Players in the game of Black Jack can be interpreted as values-driven in a number of ways. Each player comes to the game of Black Jack for different reasons; with a different set of “values”. They may play the game for pure personal enjoyment and fun, they may want to impress their friends if they are attending the casino socially, they may be talented, experienced players who view the game as a hobby, or they may enjoy the thrill of gambling, and even be addicted to it. These “values” or “reasons” for playing correlate with protean values; that were expressed by interviewees at Majesté; that they find happiness and fun in their career (the game), and that they pursue their career because they feel they are talented at it and hence make a contribution (just like an expert Black Jack player), and that they experience freedom and growth (like a Black Jack player a consultant can “play” their career for as long as they like, leaving when it is not fun any more, and ultimately their skills will improve the more they play). However, just like consultants at Majesté, Black Jack players are driven by traditional (organizational, or “casino”) values – they play to win, and winning is associated with monetary rewards. Like a Black Jack player, our interviewees can claim that they play the game according to their own values, however the casino/organization ensures that they ultimately play to win.

Black Jack players can also be interpreted to be self-directed in a number of ways. They are able to manage or choose different elements of the game, for example which table to sit at, how much to bet, whether or not they receive a third or fourth card after their initial two, how long to play the game and whether they play regularly or not. Players may believe that different tables offer better chances of winning than others. The choices available to players in Black Jack can be compared to those of consultants at Majesté. Our interviewees claim that different projects (different tables) give them a better chance of being getting promoted (winning). They may choose to receive a third or fourth card, believing that this will increase their success (as with the extra-curricular activities). Thus they enjoy a range of choices within their career (the game), and at least believe they have the ability to influence different facets of it.

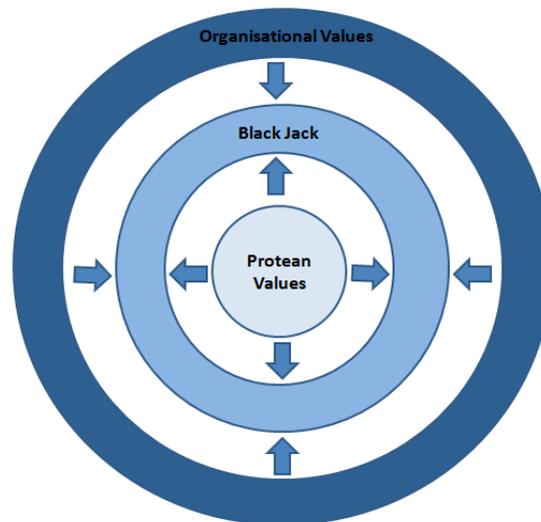
However, despite the “illusion of career control” experienced by our interviewees (players), it is the organisation (the casino) that determines their success. Just as the casino “always wins,” so does the organisation. The organisation (casino) is a highly controlled environment, in that it controls project allocation (the tables), and the promotion process (chance of winning). Hierarchy exists within Majesté, as it does within a casino, as our interviewees chances of promotion (winning) are ultimately determined by the hierarchy (the casino controls the number of wins so it can ultimately profit). However, consultants may or may not be aware of these controlling and limiting conditions, such as bureaucracy and hierarchy, just as players may not be aware that casino controls the amount of wins, and external conditions such as lighting, noise levels, and beverage consumption to encourage them to keep playing. An “illusion of career control” may be experienced by our interviewees, just as it is experienced by players at a casino, in that they may believe they manage the game however it is ultimately controlled by the casino.

Our interviewees experience a blurring of their own personal values into organisational values, as they spend more “time” at the organisation. With “time”, the organisation hence plays a greater and greater role in our interviewees’ lives and career gradually takes over “life”. A correlation can be made here between this phenomenon and a player, who initially came to the Black Jack table for personal enjoyment, or as part of a social occasion, may, if they continued to play more and more, become more competitive and then gamble more, and assumedly, win, but also lose more. Just as organisational values may become blurred over time, so too may the players’ reasons for playing – they may believe they are doing it for

purely entertainment value, however, just as the casino desires, they may have now become a regular gambler.

We believe that the “Black Jack” metaphor describes the career experience of interviewees at Majesté, by encompassing the idea of being values-driven and self-directed. It also illustrates the ultimate controlled wielded by the organisation over consultants’ careers as well as the blurring of organisational and individual values over “time”. Figure 2 illustrates this interrelationship between the “Black Jack” metaphor, protean values and organisational values.

***Figure 2: The Relationship between the Black Jack Metaphor, Organisational Values and Protean Values***



In this section we have discussed our research findings and developed the metaphor of “Black Jack”. We will now present our conclusion.

## **6. Conclusion**

The aim of this thesis was to study protean career within management consulting firm. The literature (Baruch, 2004; Donnelly, 2009; Kalleberg, 2009) as well as similarities we identified between management consulting careers and protean careers illustrate that protean career should be possible, and indeed expected within management consultancy. Therefore,

our guiding research question was: *In what way do employees within Majesté experience protean career?*

When conducting the research, our emphasis was on interpreting understandings and meanings that individuals ascribe to their career. We were able to do this through the use of qualitative methods, to collect our empirical material, and an abductive approach to our analysis that involved iteration between themes from the literature on protean career and themes we identified during the analytical process. Broader interpretations were also enabled through the use of metaphors. Here we summarise our findings as well as our theoretical contribution. We will also reflect on our research and suggest directions for future research.

### **6.1 Main Findings**

We interpret that, at Majesté, our interviewees could not be seen to be following a strictly protean career. Some interviewees did appear to be values-driven in that they used their own values to evaluate their success, thus achieving psychological success; some even pursued a “path with a heart” (Shepard, 1984; Hall, 1996). However, other interviewees were more driven by traditional values such as pay, rank and status (Maguire, 2002; Baruch, 2004; Carbrera, 2008). We therefore identified inconsistencies in their values. Interviewees may have been driven by more traditional values due to the influence of Majesté: they may have experienced a “blurring of values”. This may have occurred as Majesté influenced not only their career, but also their lives. This “blurring of values” could not be explained by the protean career concept.

We found that this “blurring of values” was similar to the concept of normative control. Normative control is “the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings to guide their actions (...)” (Kunda, 1992). Majesté is perceived to exert normative control by catering for other parts of our interviewees’ lives, parts that would usually remain in the private sphere, for example, spousal relations, and community involvement. The more “time” our interviewees spend at Majesté, the more likely they are to experience a blurring of values. Individual, protean values hence converge into organisational (traditional) values as individuals’ careers become their lives.

Interviewees also claimed to be self-directed, an important aspect of protean career where an individual, as opposed to the organisation, manages their career (Hall & Moss, 1998). They

claimed they were self-directed as they were able to exercise choice over different aspects of their career, for example, they could influence the promotion process and decide whether to participate in extracurricular activities. They also appeared to be flexible and adaptable in their approach to their career (Hall, 1996). Despite their claims, the interviewees' ability to manage their career appeared to be limited by hierarchical and bureaucratic restraints, as well as strict career paths. Despite these constraints, individuals appeared to be largely unaware of the restrictions on their ability to manage their career. We thus termed this phenomenon "illusions of career control" in that interviewees believed they managed their career, however it was ultimately managed by the organisation. The protean metaphor insinuates complete freedom in career management, hence these "illusions of career control" are also not covered by the concept.

We therefore concluded that the protean metaphor does not reflect the career experiences of our interviewees at Majesté, in that it does not explain "values inconsistencies", or "illusions of career control". Therefore, we developed a new metaphor that would portray these aspects of their career experience.

## **6.2 Theoretical Contribution**

The new metaphor that we developed to portray the career experiences of our interviewees was "Black Jack". In this metaphor, the organisation, Majesté, is equated to a casino where the game of Black Jack is played; the game stands for an employee's career, the players of the game are our interviewees and the dealer represents management.

The metaphor illustrates that players (our interviewees) are still "values-driven" and "self-directed"; as the protean concept suggests and we interpreted them to be (Hall, 2002; Niles et al., 2002; Baruch, 2004; Briscoe et al., 2006). However, the metaphor also points to the organisation (the casino) as the ultimate controlling force in an individual's career (the game). The metaphor explains values inconsistencies and the "blurring of values" over "time", experienced by our interviewees at Majesté, by showing how a player, who came to the Black Jack table for any number of reasons, will end up valuing what the casino most wants them to value – winning, and monetary rewards (which we equate with organisational/traditional values). The metaphor also explains "illusions of career control" in that the casino gives players the illusion that they manage the game; however the casino ultimately manages it. We believe we have thus made an important theoretical contribution by illuminating, through an

empirical research, that a protean career may not be experienced within management consultancy (and specifically within Majesté) and that a different type of career may be experienced – the Black Jack career.

### **6.3 Reflections and Further Research**

Our empirical material produced several additional interesting questions/findings, some of which we briefly touched upon and others which we believe are worth looking into. Firstly, whilst normative control was one of numerous finding within our study, we believe that it could be worthwhile to further examine normative control in regards to an individual's career within management consultancy firms as a specific topic of a future study. These investigations may assist in further explaining the controlling structures and their implications within Majesté.

A second theme with potential for further research would be how interviewees expressed the feelings of enjoyment and happiness from their career at Majesté and the lifestyle that is created through extensive involvements in their work and non-work related activities at Majesté, thus, career becomes their life. We suggest that future research could be useful in examining how the merging of career and the individuals' life through Majesté changes an individual's career experiences.

Our study is of course, not without limitations. One limitation of our study is that our metaphor did not include any reliability assessments, something that Cornelissen et al. (2008) recommend when developing metaphors. We did not consider it appropriate to assess our own metaphor as we developed to apply to the particular empirical situation that we witnessed, however, we would hope that future researchers could use other empirical material to understand whether it exists elsewhere.

Another limitation of our study is that our findings cannot be generalised. Our study may have been able to be improved if we could have gathered a larger selection of empirical material through more interviews and observations, over a longer time period. We could have also interviewed consultants from other consulting companies. This would have allowed us to gain a broader understanding of how career is experienced in the management consulting industry.

In conclusion, in this thesis we have proposed a new metaphor, "Black Jack" to describe the career experiences of our interviewees at Majesté. We have shown that they cannot, and do

not, fully experience protean career. Whilst we intended “Black Jack” to only describe the situation we witnessed, we would hope that it generally increases understanding about how career is experienced within management consulting firms. We hope that our metaphor proves useful and welcome future research to further develop it.

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