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Careers in Practice – A Processual Approach

*How consultants make sense of their career
in a Knowledge Intensive Firm*

by

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Abstract

- Title** Careers in Practice - A Processual Approach.
How consultants make sense of their career in a Knowledge Intensive Firm
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- Keywords:** Career Development, Career planning, Careers in practice, Processual Career Approach, Knowledge Intensive Firms, Knowledge worker
- Thesis Purpose:** The purpose is to explore careers in practice and provide a more nuanced understanding of how knowledge workers make sense of their careers.
- Methodology:** The research is conducted with a qualitative and interpretive perspective.
- Theoretical Perspective:** The foundation for the theoretical framework is based around career literature in the context of Knowledge Intensive Firms.
- Empirical Foundation:** The research is based on semi-structured interviews with consultants at IBM Sweden.
- Conclusion:** Careers in practice are complex and there are several dimensions which individuals need to acknowledge apart from their own dedication to advance in their career.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and problematization

Present careers are viewed as boundaryless (Baruch, 2004; Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005) and our possibilities to make a career are perceived as being more accessible and achievable in an increasingly fast and changing global market (Baruch, 2004; Sparrow, Brewster & Dickmann, 2008). Thus, our careers today are less predictable and improvisation is commonly occurring (Sennett, 2006). The responsibility to accomplish a successful career is then primarily placed on the individual nowadays and they have to possess the ability to “navigate their career” (Akkermans & Tims, 2017). Such statements correspond to the view of people being aware of their talents and strengths, thus controlling their own career destiny (Kerfoot, 2005).

Moreover, the need for employees to proactively ‘craft’ or self-manage their career is increasing, which makes it crucial for employees to possess competencies that enables them to shape their career paths (Akkermans & Tims, 2017). A way for individuals to achieve their career goals is by having a career plan (Zikic & Klehe, 2006). Rogers, Creed and Glendon (2008) describe how career planning could be an integrated part of the career development process. It is commonly an activity associated with a high level of goal setting and it is linked to personal efficacy. Moreover, as the future is unpredictable, individuals can engage in career planning to try to forecast what is yet to come, to get a sense of security. The career plan can increase the job satisfaction and can make the employees more comfortable in their work (Kayalar & Özmutaf, 2009). Still, in the end, planning is about probabilities and not certainties. To plan is the attempt of trying to make a clear picture of the situation, to know what the risks are, and how one will deal with them. This can be a determining factor to whether the individuals achieve a sustainable career, or get lost on their way (Law, 2001).

However, it seems to be an overemphasis in career literature focusing on *personal agency* instead of contextual forces that could affect the individual's career (Dries, 2011; Mayrhofer, Meyer & Steyrer, 2007; Gina Giau, 2016). To look beyond the career as something plannable and individual-centred may consequently be questioned. Ng and Feldman (2014) further stress that a small amount of research has been concentrated on aspects that can undermine how the individual perceives his career advancement. Thus, in career theory, Mayrhofer, Meyer and Steyrer (2007) argue that both in empirical and theoretical research, it is prominent to explicitly

or implicitly accentuate the perspective where the individual is central for his career. Still, the issues of the *individual* and *context* are significant within career theory, where they each have their place in career theory (Mayrhofer, Meyer & Steyrer, 2007). However, research that combines these two factors and gives a deeper understanding of what forces may affect the individual's career and their understanding, is a field that remains under-researched (Ng & Feldman, 2014; Gina Giao, 2016).

Still, to manoeuvre one's career, one should acknowledge that we live in a progressively global and complex environment, and should keep up with shifting technological changes and "the waves of knowledge" (Bierema & Hill, 2005; Law, 2001). As the market is moving towards being more knowledge intensive, it appears as knowledge has become more important than labour, however this could be debated. Nevertheless, many people emphasise knowledge as the key to present and future business (Alvesson, 2004). This is indicated by the increased attention knowledge intensive firms, KIFs, have received over the years. Partly because of the rising number of IT and management consultancies and the growing size of numerous KIFs (Alvesson, 2004). A KIF could shortly be described as an organisation providing knowledge based services or working with complex knowledge (Newell, Robertson, Scarbrough & Swan, 2009).

Lastly, as KIF's are characterized by a high level of ambiguity and complex knowledge-based work (Alvesson, 2004), it may be intriguing to look closer into how the complexities surrounding careers, planning and KIFs interact and affect the knowledge workers' career advancement.

1.2 Purpose

We live in a time that is characterized by a fast-changing environment and the individuals' ability to achieve career success are evermore possible today (Baruch, 2004; Sparrow, Brewster & Dickmann, 2008). Still, there is seemingly a common perception within literature that a career can be planned. Yet, one may wonder, is it possible to plan a career, especially in the context of a knowledge intensive firm characterised by ambiguous work and complex knowledge? Thus, our purpose is to provide a more nuanced understanding of how knowledge workers make sense of their careers and what perception they might have of a career planning, since their work is ambiguous (Newell et al. 2009). We also aim to explore what aspect may affect their career advancement, which current literature also emphasise is a field that require

further research. Consequently, we intend to contribute to fill the gap within career literature of the issues with acknowledging both the *individual* and the *contextual* aspects of a career.

1.3 Research questions

We aim to qualitatively analyse how knowledge workers at IBM make sense of their career and explore what aspects influence their careers. This leads us to our research questions:

- *How do consultants at IBM make sense of their career in the knowledge intensive firm?*
 - *What role does the career planning have for the consultants' career development?*
 - *Which dimensions affect the consultants' career development?*

2. Method and methodology

This study has been based on qualitative research that attempts to make sense and interpret a certain phenomenon in its natural setting (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). In qualitative research, especially factors such as epistemology and ontology are worth to mention (Bryman & Bell, 2011) which will be described first in this chapter. The next section will describe our research approach. Later, we will discuss the collection of empirical data and the interview process. Lastly, we will provide a critical evaluation of our research design and process.

2.1 Ontological and Epistemological considerations

Epistemology and ontology are presented as central elements in qualitative research (Carter & Littler, 2007) and we find these concepts highly suitable for our qualitative study. These two aspects can acknowledge the ambiguity of the interpretive possibilities that the researchers need to explore their construction of reality (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).

Ontology, the study of being (Bryman & Bell, 2013), is concerned with what reality is and what constitutes for reality (Scotland, 2012). The social reality can then be seen as something external to the social actors or something that these creates and changes (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Furthermore, epistemology is the theory of knowledge (Bryman & Bell, 2013). As Carter and Litter (2007, p.1317) express, epistemology can also be understood as the “justification of knowledge”. In our research, we adopted the interpretive epistemological position, which Bryman and Bell (2011, p17) argue is “*predicted upon the view that a strategy is required that respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural science and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action.*”

In other words, a social constructive approach was used in this research where we take a stance in the view that the world is socially constructed. We aimed to interpret what the consultants said and to go deeper, rather than to accept someone at face value. Furthermore, as Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) emphasise, what may be ‘the truth’ in one context may not be the same in another, due to the changeable characteristics of social phenomenon’s. Throughout our research, we consequently took into consideration that what the consultants said should not be taken for ‘the truth’, however, their perspective and understanding of the subject of careers provided us with a rich material to gain a deeper understanding of how they made sense of a career and the career planning.

2.2 Research approach

An abductive approach was used that combines both inductive and deductive characteristics (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). The former has its roots in empirical data while the latter departs from theory (Prasad, 2005). The abductive approach enabled for a flexible research process where we could move between theory and our empirical material in order to find similarities and discrepancies. It also gave us the opportunity to continuously revise our chosen theories to make sure they were still suitable for our study.

In the beginning of our study, we had put together a brief overview of the theories which we thought would be suitable for our research questions about career sensemaking in a KIF. Throughout our interviews, it became evident that other aspects than what we previously thought influenced their careers, such as the processes within IBM. Consequently, our empirical material indicated how other dimensions influenced the knowledge worker's career than what existing literature has emphasised. Our empirical material provided a slightly different point of view which we thought was interesting to look closer into. During the interview process, we therefore revised and modified our theoretical framework to make sure to incorporate interesting angle of arrivals. In other words, the abductive approach made our research more flexible and more prone to pick up new hints which in the end became vital findings for our theoretical contribution.

Moreover, the hermeneutic considerations are fundamentally based around interpretations and it acknowledges the rather complex nature of interpretations that consists of numerous meanings, that both could be homogeneous or conflicting (Prasad, 2005). As our research aimed to go deeper in different aspects of the meaning of having a career, we searched for the understanding of what was said, but also potential hidden meanings. However, as Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) express, there are a few of hermeneutic understandings. In broader terms, hermeneutics main point is that the *whole* can only be understood on the basis of the *part*, and vice versa which can be described as forming a circle. In our research, we then had the insight that in order to understand the phenomena of a career, we needed to acknowledge the different aspects it may consist of and vice versa.

2.3 Empirical data collection

2.3.1 Sampling process

Our interest in IBM arose through a guest lecture given last year at Lund University, School of Economics and Management. The given presentation was interesting and suitable for our program and IBM was presented as an organisation that values knowledge and technology and constantly were looking for new possibilities. Thus, in the prospect for a research site, IBM came to mind. We chose to approach the organisation by using the contact information of the previous lecturer to examine if there were any possibilities to have IBM as our research site. Our initial contact responded to our research request and forwarded necessary information to colleagues within Sweden to explore the possibilities to find potential interviewees.

The interviewees thus consisted of a convenience sampling which is also a common approach among qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Since IBM is a global organisation with employees deployed across the world and the required travelling for consultants in their everyday work, we found it most suitable to simply interview the consultants that would be available for us. We also found it highly suitable to have a convenience sampling due to the time restriction for our research. We did not want to renounce the opportunity to get an insight of how a career is looked upon at IBM, which is also another acceptable reason for using a convenience sampling.

Through our initial contact, five of our interviewees became available. These individuals could then in turn spread the word among their colleagues and this provided us with five additional interviewees. Thus, a snowball sampling was also used, where the initial contact is used to create contact with others (Bryman & Bell, 2011). All the communication occurred through shared emails, this enabled us to approach the consultants directly to set a date and location once interest was shown to participate. The interviewees decided where and how they wanted to do the interview. Some of our interviews were conducted through skype since some of the consultants were based in Stockholm or outside the Malmö region, whereas the remaining took place at IBM's office in Malmö.

2.3.2 Semi-structured interviews

For our study, we used semi-structured interviews with an interview guide. Apart from providing a structure, this approach also enabled for a flexible interview process (Bryman & Bell, 2013) since we got the opportunity to ask questions from our guide, but also to ask questions in depth, depending on what stood out in the interviews and to resolve any ambiguities. Everyone involved in our research was given anonymity and we signed a non-disclosure agreement. These kinds of agreements are commonly in line with ethical standards regarding qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Our interviewees consisted mainly of consultants, both at junior and senior levels. Thus, we hoped to get a nuanced understanding of how a career is seen and understood, depending on which position and perspective the interviewee had. The length of our 11 interviews varied from 45 up to 90 minutes in order to reach a depth in the interviews. The length depended on where we were in the interview process, if empirical saturation was reached or if we wanted to ask follow up questions on interesting themes. The 11 interviews resulted in a rich material and enabled for a deep understanding of the research subject. Both researchers were present at all of the interviews and we interviewed one consultant at the time. All the interviews were conducted in Swedish, since it was the consultants first language and ours as well. We thought this would contribute for the consultants to feel comfortable and speak more freely with a rich vocabulary.

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed, most of the interviews were transcribed the same day as they were conducted. This helped us to overcome the limitations of relying on our own memories and allowed for a more comprehensive research regarding what the interviewees said. By making the transcribing an ongoing activity throughout the interviews, it made us more conscious about new appearing themes which we could ask about in the upcoming interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

We aimed to briefly analyse the data continuously as the interviews were conducted. Once everything was transcribed a lot of time was spent on reading through our material. As Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) argue, to sort qualitative data could be described as to 'get intimate with it' by spending time with it and to get to know it. When our initial sorting was done, the categorical reduction begun. We aimed to reduce the material by prioritising some categories at the expense of other less in line with our research question. As researchers, we highlighted a more convenient amount of the material, while we kept the bigger picture in mind,

as in line with Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) ideas. Once this was done, our sorting led to several codes - data broken down into segments which then were given labels (Bryman & Bell, 2011). These codes became our framework for the research and the starting point for further analysis and theorization.

As mentioned, in total 11 interviews were made and the overview can be seen below in the figure. The consultants were only given last names to contribute to them being anonymous, since their gender would remain unknown. All the consultants were therefore referred to as him to further preserve their anonymity. Then, since the consultants had different positions which may affect their perspective and understanding of our research subject, they were ascribed their title, *junior* or *senior consultant*, which was shorten into J.C or S.C in the empirical material. The three individuals with *senior positions* have previously been working as consultants and were called S.P.

Name	Position
Ahlström	Junior Consultant
Bergdahl	Junior Consultant
Cederberg	Junior Consultant
Dahlblom	Junior Consultant
Eklund	Senior Consultant
Forsberg	Senior Consultant
Gabrielsson	Senior Consultant
Hallgren	Senior Consultant
Isaksson	Senior Position
Johansson	Senior Position
Kjellgren	Senior Position

2.4 Evaluation of research design and process

When evaluating research in management and business, the most common criterions are validity, reliability and replicability. However, the use of these in qualitative research has been debated (Bryman & Bell, 2011). There are also the alternative criteria for evaluating qualitative research consistent of *trustworthiness* and *authenticity* whereas the first is what we will discuss for our research. Trustworthiness is built upon credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability (Bryman & Bell, 2011), whereas the initial three will be discussed.

By providing a thorough description of our research process and act according to good practice within research we aim to give our research credibility. Still, since every qualitative research is contextually unique, by providing a *thick description* of our empirical material (Bryman & Bell, 2011), we aim to contribute for the possibilities of transferability.

As conductors of a qualitative research, we are aware of the impossibilities to be completely objective. Our collected empirical material has been thoroughly discussed and analysed by the two researchers of this study, this allowed us to continuously go through our material to make sure personal values did not affect the research process or our findings. Even though we did not always have the same idea initially, by discussing the subjects in depth, we ended up with a thorough analysis and a critical point of view. Since both researchers reached a consensus in regards of what we saw and heard, we aimed to show that the research has been conducted in good faith. Thus, we aimed to fulfil the criteria of *confirmability* (Bryman & Bell, 2011),

Throughout our research process, source criticisms have constantly been present in our minds. We took a stance in the traditional source criticism criteria's which are authenticity, relationship in time, independence and the freedom of tendency (Thurén, 2005). The search for literature was done through the online research database *Ebscohost* where we chose to limit the results to *peer-reviewed* sources. When we searched for new academic articles, we aimed to choose those recently published, whenever possible. In some occasions, we decided to use the original source since many of the new academic papers kept referring to some specific authors. Throughout our research, we have presented primary sources and avoided secondary referencing as widely as possible. Furthermore, the chosen textbooks mainly consisted of course literature from Lund University. With these choices, we aimed to ensure that our sources are reliable, thus a critical approach has pervaded our research process.

Moreover, we were aware of the limitations with using a convenience sampling, however since our aim was to conduct in-depth interviews, thus get a deeper understanding of the values and sensemaking within a specific context, our focus was *not* to generalise any results, which is commonly the purpose with quantitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Still, by providing with a detailed narration of our research approach, our aim was to give our research transparency which is often a problem with qualitative studies (Bryman & Bell 2011).

There are some limitations regarding that the interviews were held in Swedish. However, by translating the empirical material in detail, close to the original statements and to continuously revise our translations, we aimed to provide a fair presentation - with minimal modification other than what is necessary to make sense of language differences. Overall, we find that our choices regarding research approach and method have contributed to the quality of this study. They have enabled for an interpretive and critical research and given us a clear framework of how to approach qualitative research.

3. Theoretical framework

Since we have an abductive research approach, the chosen topics in the theoretical framework reflects our empirical material. Thus, significant aspects of making a career which became evident from the empirical material will consequently be what our theoretical framework is built around. The first chapter aims to briefly discuss the subject of knowledge intensive firms and knowledge workers, KWs. This will serve as the starting-point for the theoretical framework since it will set the scene for the context in which we will analyse career development. Part of that section will also cover aspects concerning global KIFs and the processes within them. The next section will consequently discuss careers theories with a focus on ideas that a career can be managed and planned. Ideas focusing on the individual being in charge of his own career will also be brought up. Furthermore, career planning will be a key dimension in this section. The final part will present the subject of network since it can be a vital part of having a career and for the consultants' career development.

3.1 Knowledge intensive firms and knowledge workers

The term *knowledge* could be quite vague covering almost everything and simultaneously, nothing. It could be applied to 'cognitive issues' characterized by a certain complex and ambiguous nature (Alvesson, 2004). Still, one way to describe knowledge is by dividing it into tacit and explicit dimensions. The former refers to knowledge that can be formally expressed and converted into different kinds of data. Tacit knowledge has partly an unconscious nature and is problematic to separate from its owner (Mládková, Zouharová & Nový, 2015). Nevertheless, consultants, academics, business journals and organisational practitioners all emphasise competence and knowledge as key features in organisations. More specifically, many people view *knowledge* as a significant dimension to future but also current business (Alvesson, 2004).

A KIF can be understood as an organisation that sells products based on knowledge or use rather complex knowledge (Alvesson, 2004; Newell et al. 2009). KIFs have a tendency towards being service based and to keep its expert workforce is crucial for its competitive advantage. Other characteristics may be highly qualified knowledge workers that enjoy a reasonably high amount of autonomy that value the freedom to determine their work practices in their knowledge based work (Newell et al. 2009). The use of symbolic and intellectual skills in their work are also common and organisational hierarchy is typically downplayed in favour of more

ad hoc organisational structures. Power and information asymmetry can also occur that supports the individual working in the KIF, not the client. Therefore, quality assessment can be complex since it normally is characterised by uncertainty and subjectivity. Still, to be a KIFs may be highly desirable among organisations, since the label KIF is associated with legitimacy and status (Alvesson, 2004).

In the literature on KW, there are a variety of definitions, ideas and classifications concerning who the knowledge worker is (Mládková, Zouharová, & Nový, 2015). Newell et al. (2009) describe a KW as someone who typically has specialist skills and a high level of education which they can use to diagnose and solve problems. Walumbwa, Christensen & Hailey (2011) further emphasise that KW require relatively little supervision and are independent thinkers. They enjoy their work because of the fulfilment it gives and they value challenges. KW may also have the desire to be engaged in their organisation, thus “*making it a part of their whole being.*” (Walumbwa, Christensen, & Hailey, 2011, p.113). Or as Davenport (2010) explains, what KW do for a living is to *think*. They are experienced, well-educated or experts mainly working with the application, distribution and creation of knowledge.

KWs are typically portrayed as ambitious individuals focused on their career development and are ‘upwardly mobile’. Their positions normally require continuous improvement and learning. Thus, stimulating and interesting work tasks are significant to facilitate for a positive work environment for KW. To explore knowledge are often part of the work task that gives the strongest fulfilment in KIFs, in comparison to use previous solutions and doing similar projects as before (Mládková, Zouharová & Nový, 2015). The extent to which KIFs provide development possibilities and attractive work tasks could consequently be greatly connected to if employees choose to leave the organisation or be loyal (Alvesson, 2004).

KWs and their performance, skills and motivation are crucial in knowledge work (Newell et al. 2009). Principles that may be used to have a low retention rate are: identification with the firm, a high salary, a good work environment and career prospects. The financial side of being employed are commonly downplayed in many KIFs, instead the intrinsic aspects of work are stressed. Furthermore, in KIFs there is a constant balancing act between finding the best people imaginable but also to have procedures and systems, and a shared organisational orientation (Alvesson, 2004). Consequently, we find that the design of an organisation may play an important role when combining organisational interest with the interest of knowledge workers in an effective way.

3.1.1 Global KIFs and regulated work processes

KWs are employed in small start-ups and large global organisations (Davenport, 2005) such as IBM. Ezzamel et al. (1999 cited in Busco, Giovannoni & Scapens, 2008) stress that global organisations often seek competitive advantage through formalization and co-ordination meanwhile the need for flexibility and local responsiveness persists. Global organisations are characterised by their substantial complexity and heterogeneity, the internal diversity among the subsidiaries and their workforce (Busco, Giovannoni & Scapens, 2008). Therefore, the challenge is the ongoing alignment of local business processes with global corporate strategies (Devinney, Midgley & Venaik, 2000).

As part of being a global company, the *knowledge bureau* can serve as the most common structure among global IT- and management consultancy organisations. This kind of knowledge organisation resembles “common organisations” the most, since it puts a lot of restraints on individual independence. The organisational work in knowledge bureaus are kept within a standardised framework. Common for these organisations is to have senior consultants to sell in the projects, while the junior employees are more responsible for the delivery of the actual project (Alvehus & Kärreman, 2012). This makes knowledge sharing even more crucial in the global market for organisations to stay competitive. By combining resources, technologies, knowledge and skills, it creates value for the organisation and therefore, the ability to co-ordinate and integrate ‘cross-borders’ activities are essential (Busco, Giovannoni & Scapens, 2008). Nevertheless, Kostova and Roth (2002) emphasise the endless struggle of global versus local aspects of an organisation. The relationship between the parent company and the subsidiaries is a crucial element since it influences the way that demands are understood and made clear in the local context of the subsidiaries.

With our two overall topics of *KIF's and KWs* and *global processes*, we have discussed the foundation for our theoretical framework. Thus, we aim to move onward to next section that presents the relevant sub themes for our research field, starting with career theory.

3.2 Career Theory

This chapter aims to give a broad understanding of career theory before we narrow it down and present the topic of career planning. To avoid any confusion, the concepts career development and career advancement will be used interchangeably throughout our research.

Career literature has from time to time been reshaped, new trends emerge while others become outdated. There is a spectrum of diverse career theories, such as Holland's theory that presents the idea that careers should be built on the match between one's personality and the environment. This may result in a higher job satisfaction, career stability and achievement success (Monson, 2012). Other theories such as decision-making models are also a popular subject. Phillips (1997) emphasises that many models are seen as tools that value rationality and objectivity. Thus, the individual is seen as structured and independent, consequently thoughtful when making decisions and manages to optimize individual achievement as the primary goal (Phillips, 1997). Career related activities tend to advocate the steps of aiding the individual to 'know himself' and to identify the job market, and rationally connecting the two areas (Hartung & Bluestein, 2002).

Career theories today thus emphasise that the career is driven by the individual and not the organisation, as Hall (1996), Sullivan, (1999) and Baruch (2004) was early to point out, and stressed that the career of the 21st century will be recreated from time to time as the individual and its environment changes. Furthermore, research show that in knowledge intensive economies, people tend to change workplaces frequently and the importance for individuals to have the skills to manage their career paths is highlighted (Sultana, 2012). Thus, the need for employees to self-manage their career is increasing, making it crucial for employees to have the right competencies that enables them to shape their career paths. Hence, the individual above all is more responsible for achieving success regarding their careers (Akkermans & Tims, 2017). Hoekstra (2011, p.159) describes the highly-educated individual as being the "*entrepreneur of their own careers*". Furthermore, Ceschi, Costantini, Phillips & Sartori (2017) emphasise how the individual is the central figure of their own success story and career development within their work life.

The subject of career development is commonly seen from two perspectives, the individual and the organisational (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence, 1989). Hedge, Borman & Bourne (2006) explain that the individual process is an attempt to raise awareness in regard to the limitations and opportunities and to find career-related goals. The individual can then take on work and

developmental experiences intended to achieve specific career goals, typically in a productive and rewarding manner. On the other hand, the organisational perspective is commonly related to the activities the organisation engages in to choose and develop their employees in order to meet future organisational needs (Hedge, Borman & Bourne, 2006). Still, as the responsibility for career management is put more on the individual (Hedge, Borman & Bourne, 2006; Ceschi et al. 2017), it is still valuable for organisations to participate in the process, since the benefits can result in less obsolescence and employees that are more motivated and satisfied (Hedge, Borman & Bourne, 2006).

Agency is another concept worth mentioning in relation to careers. Bandura (2006) stresses that the meaning of being an agent involves individuals to intentionally influence the circumstances in their life. *“They are contributors to their life circumstances, not just products of them.”* (Bandura, 2006, p.164). Agentic traits are to be independent and analytical which embody their motivation to improve and go further in life (Mollaret & Miraucourt, 2016). Thus, personal influence is a significant dimension and agentic people tend to be self-regulating, proactive and self-organising (Bandura, 2006). Agency could also be connected to individualism (Dubois & Beauvois, 2005). Consequently, since the individual actively may shape his life which the career is a part of - to plan the career may come natural.

3.2.1 Career planning

Career planning is even more significant in the global, complex and diverse world we live in nowadays. The role of having a specific career planning is thus vital for both employers and employees (Yuhee & Norihiko, 2016) By having a transparent career planning model which is easy to understand, organisations may benefit from it since the model could promote organisational growth (Waheed & Zaim, 2015). Gould (1979) define career planning as a set of careers goals the individual chooses and their strategies for reaching them. Schein and Maanen (2016) then highlight that career planning is important for to map and understand what values, goals and motivations a person has.

DeSimone, Werner and Harris (2002) further explain the meaning of career planning as an activity which the individual performs for the sake of control and to make sense of their work own life. The individual is in focus, however, supervisors, counsellors and persons within and outside the organisation can also provide their assistance. Successful career planning is then achieved when the individuals know their goals and the steps leading there. Thus Seabrooks-Blackmore and Williams (2012, cited in Webb, Repetto, Seabrooks-Blackmore, Patterson &

Alderfer, 2014) argue that people who are autonomous are better prepared to control their own future. Still, Hall (1986 p.3) argues that “*no amount of individual career planning and preparation can be effective if organizational opportunities for career movement are not available*”. Once a career plan is refined, the assistance from the organisation becomes a crucial element, since the need for information about career opportunities still exists and is important for implementing the plan (Hall, 1986).

Waheed and Zaim (2015) further emphasise the significance of having a specific career planning system, since this may be valuable both for the employee and the organisation. Organisations can have articulated visions for career managing skills in order to strategically increase the competitiveness. An underlying consequence of using career planning as a competitive tool might be that employees blame themselves if they are not able to successfully manage their own career (Sultana, 2012).

Hall (1986) further emphasises that the consequence for *not planning* one’s development might result in difficulties to respond to career management activities that the organisation presents. Yet, individual career decisions are affected by present skills and interests, along with previous work experiences and other long-term plans for the future. Therefore organisational changes may also have an impact on how careers unravel. The expectations from employees affects how organisations construct and implement career development programs, meaning that organisations today must consider the need for a more collaborative and flexible career planning and not expect that the organisational appraisals of what is best for employees are the best fit (Hedge, Borman & Bourne, 2006).

3.3 Networking - Relationships & Mentors

In career literature, it is highlighted that social networks may encourage the individual’s career advancement since it is significant for obtaining information (Scheidegger, 2012). Moreover, in KIFs there is an emphasis on relationships, networking and social competence. To network with other industries and colleagues are also significant dimensions for KWs (Alvesson, 2004). Since knowledge is often complex and difficult to grasp, one way to ensure the expertise is shared is through connections with others (Alvehus & Kärreman, 2012).

Knowledge and knowledge work are considered important and increasingly more important for organisations’ competitiveness (Alvehus & Kärreman, 2012), consequently, to enable knowledge, KWs *main expertise*, to spread - networks can be seen as channels that creates

connections between individuals and organisations (Newell et al. 2009). Therefore, to network can have a direct impact on career outcomes for the individual, such as getting a promotion (Forre & Dougherty, 2004). The most successful networkers are skilled in establishing relationships and are quick to share *knowledge* and *information* (Cross, Davenport & Cantrell, 2003). While networks can support and accelerate knowledge flows, it can also slow down the sharing of knowledge (Edelman et al. 2004). The stronger the connection between individuals are - the better it facilitates for the transfer of tacit, complex knowledge. Since KIFs emphasise the importance of knowledge sharing for problem solving, strong connections play an important role (Scheidegger, 2012). Studies have also highlighted the importance to continuously network in areas of innovation and to overcome existing limitations within their networks (Cross, Davenport & Cantrell, 2003).

Furthermore, to have mentor relationships is significant for employees' networks and it is a source for resources (Podolny & Baron, 1997), thus knowledge. Mentoring can serve as a crucial element in terms of career development, almost as a life preserver in this 'knowledge era' with high competition and shifting environments. In the late 20th century, ideas focusing on individuals being less loyal to the organisation and more committed to their own career and the relationship with colleges then became more prominent (Bierema & Hill, 2005). Still, organisations usually provide mentorships in order to match a new employee with a senior and more experienced person in hopes of that valuable knowledge and expertise will be shared and learned (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence, 1989). What the mentors mainly offer can be divided into two aspects: social and psychological support or career support (Young et al. 2006, cited in Mankin, 2009). The relationship between the individuals can provide valuable opportunities to advance towards one's career goals (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence, 1989).

Still, Arthur, Hall and Lawrence (1989) argue that in order for an effective mentoring process to grow, opportunities for frequent and open communication between employees must exist. These relationships should aim to fulfil developmental needs. Therefore, the success of a mentor is determined by the skills and knowledge they possess and their ability to support mentee development (Pfund, 2016). What becomes important is the will and interest for employees to build valuable relationships and to have the ability to do so (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence, 1989). Meanwhile, all mentoring does not work effectively and misalignment between the mentee and the mentor can occur (Mankin, 2009). Yet, for relationships to work effectively, there is a need for some resemblance between the actors which will enable for a better understanding and a successful network (Scheidegger, 2012).

Apart from having effective mentorships, Crawshaw and Game (2015) argue that line managers plays an increasingly important part for career development within organisations. To be an effective line manager is associated with being aware of the what the employees career goals and needs are. Accessibility to provide career advice and support are significant dimensions to facilitate for the employee's developmental aspirations. A skilled manager can also assist the self-assessment process of an employee by providing feedback on performance, potential, and past assignments (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence, 1989).

Thus, to network is considered as a source for gaining knowledge that may be important for one's own career development. Managers and mentors are seemingly valuable for sharing information that is perceived as necessary for career decisions.

To summarize our theoretical framework, the starting point was to set the scene for our research context by providing theories of KIF and KW and touch upon the aspect of global KIF. The chapter of career theory touched upon several aspects such as that the individuals are the creator of their career. The responsibility of careers today is put more on the individual rather than on the organisation and the aspect of agency was emphasised. Furthermore, the theories of career planning were presented where the focus was on describing the functionality and significance of career planning but also the implications of not planning one's career. Lastly, the significance of networks was touched upon since it may be a vital aspect for KWs' career advancement as highlighted by current literature.

4. Career sensemaking at IBM

We will present our empirical material by selected themes to guide the reader through relevant parts for our research questions. Our first section describes how the individuals may see themselves in charge of their career and portrays their view of what it means to have a career. This understanding of having a career appears to partly be in line with current career literature, where the career is driven by the individual and can be managed, thus planned. The second part, divided into two subcategories will present the subject of career planning. This is where statements that support the career planning concept are highlighted and followed up with a more nuanced understanding that aims to show potential faults in the idea of rational career planning. In the third and last part, we put the career in a wider contextual matter and present different themes that emerged when we looked closer into careers in practice. Thus, we aim to present a more nuanced understanding of how consultants at IBM make sense of their careers in practice.

4.1 Case presentation

Our research will be based on collected empirical data from International Business Machines Corporation, IBM which is a global American technology company operating in over 170 countries. Technology and consulting is the at the heart of the company with around 375 000 “IBMers” working across the world. IBM Sweden was founded in 1928 which makes it one of the oldest IT companies in Sweden. The headquarter is based in Stockholm and the other offices are based in Sundsvall, Gothenburg and Malmö (IBM, n.d.a). The junior and senior consultants that participated in our research were based either in Stockholm or in Malmö, the latter is the site that we have been visiting for the personal interviews.

IBM provides a variety of products such as analytic tools, IT infrastructure and cloud services. If consultants wish to enter IMB, there are several career options. Within the organisation, there are four career peaks that define the individual's career. These are *sales*, *consulting*, *technical* and *delivery* and within each of them there are different *band* levels. The highest is number ten which is the executive level whereas the lowest entry level is number five. To advance, each level has specific requirements which all need to be accomplished in order to get promoted. To reach the next level, the employee initiates the process and present their package of approval to the promotion board of people from HR and managers. The total opportunities within each peak depends on current business needs and the numbers of people across the peaks do not consist of equal numbers (IBM, n.d.b).

4.2 The career - driven by the individual

The following section will explain the perception of making a career at IBM. It seems to exist a rational view of the possibilities for career development among both the junior and senior consultants. The consultants appear to shape their own careers:

“This is how it works, at IBM, it's pretty much up to the individual to create his situation” (Cederberg - J.C)

“Our system still relies heavily on the individual, the employee is pretty driven” (Hallgren - S.C)

It appears as a lot of responsibility is given to the consultants about their career which is in line with current literature (Hedge et al. 2006; Ceschi et al. 2016), signalling that there may be some people who are better at managing these opportunities than others. Thus, it seems as the individual is highly responsible both for his success but also failure since he is the one creating the prerequisites and the possibilities almost seems endless. The view of a career partly supports current literature that the individual is responsible for their own success which is in line with Akkermans and Tims (2017) perceptions. It also seems to occur a conception that to be driven gives the employees the ability to shape their career with IBM. The senior consultant even expresses that the *system* is based people being highly dedicated. As if working within IBM for many years has made them think that everything is possible - for the *driven individuals*.

“You push yourself in the direction you want to work in, you can influence it by yourself very much.” (Gabrielsson - S.C)

A common view among the consultants, highlighted by the quote above, is the idea that they can determine how they want their careers to develop. Consequently, the consultants appear to have agentic traits as being proactive and influence his life, as described by Bandura (2006). It implies that the individual must know to some extent in which direction to go and is in control of making these decisions. This may create a feeling of being in control in our fast moving, complex environment (Jung & Takeuchi, 2016; Bierema & Hill, 2005).

“[A career is] like a sailboat that only drifts with the streams, where nobody seems to hold in the helm or the sail. You just keep moving, you stay afloat. If you want to go somewhere special, then you have to decide, where do I want to go. Find a map, a sea chart, decide how to handle the helm and then you pull in the sail so that you can attain a steerageway, then you can steer in different rates of speed and in different directions.” (Kjellgren - S.P)

By stressing that a career can be seen as a sailboat, the consultant explains how they need to be dedicated and goal-oriented in order to move forward. Yet, it does not appear as they know *how*, just that they have to find a way to separate them from the mediocre that perhaps simply drifts with the flow. Thus, the consultants may need to be resourceful too, but the main factor appears to be their *dedication*.

Since KIFs are commonly characterised by prestige and status (Alvesson, 2004), to strive for getting to “a special place” seems to be a desire among the consultants themselves. To stand out from the others might be expected, as if to simply be good at work is almost a bad thing. Consequently, the quote above indicates that the consultant has to be in charge of their own sailboat - their career, in order to make an impression at IBM. Still, by taking it one step further, the wind to the sailboat cannot be provided by themselves, perhaps not everything is up to them. However, the idea the consultants seem to believe in, is that they are the *captain* of the boat and are responsible for their own faith, thus career:

“The persons that I experience make a career, is the one that's' very driven, very driven /.../ of course, you are skilful, you are innovative, creative.” (Johansson - S.P)

"Excuse me, shouldn't you get this promotion for free?" So to speak. It does not happen, so the drive to make a career must be there and it is not for everyone.” (Isaksson - S.P)

In other words, it strongly appears as the individual is the one who initiates for career advancement, thus may be responsible for it. This quote seems to be in line with current career ideas - the individual above all is responsible (Akkermans & Tims, 2017). By stating that the promotion does not come for free, it indicates that one has to actively work for it. As stressed above, this may not be for everyone, Perhaps the consultant have to be *truly dedicated* in order to deal with the complexity and ambiguity that KIFs commonly are characterised by (Alvesson, 2004). However, everyone may not be interested in moving forward, still, if one wishes to, a certain kind of dedication maybe a *necessity*, at least according to the consultants.

4.2.1 Self-realization and personal development

Since the consultants appear to assume that they are in charge of their own career, therefore, they are the ones that determine what it *means* to them. This following section aims to portray what they consider to be essential parts of having a career, hence partly what motivates them to move forward in their careers. The two following quotes present what a career means to the consultants:

“You are self-realizing, it's about your self-realization. This it what you talk about. "This is what I want to do", "I want to lead"”. (Cederberg - J.C)

“To get more responsibility, to get opportunities, or that, what you are working on plays a greater role.” (Dahlblom - J.C)

It appears to be highly desirable to develop oneself, to be the best version of oneself. The work in itself also appears to be vital, that they to do something meaningful that gives work fulfilment, which is in line with Walumbwa, Christensen, & Hailey's (2011) definition of KWs. Both of these statements thus paint the picture of a career as something quite special and purposeful.

"It [to make a career] is a lot about understanding what it is that you are good at and what you want to do /.../ You want to go up, up in the sky or that you just go up, up, up.” (Ahlström - J.C)

The consultant seems to put his own abilities in the centre of factors which influence his career. However, it may require a reasonably amount of self-perception, when to map out one's skills and strengths. As Mollaret and Miraucourt (2016) argue, analytical and independent, thus agentic traits could be connected to them being in charge of to wisely choose their career path, also to move forward in life. The consultant appears to embrace these traits or at least, they present themselves as independent and smart decision makers. Yet, to reach insane highs, to reach the sky seems be the status quo.

“To simply do as you always do - that is not okay. You always have to look for something, to improve something, or improve yourself. So, development and improvement is in the DNA of this company.” (Kjellgren - S.P)

It becomes clear that improvement is highly valued, probably both by the individual and the organisation as a whole. Since this is a KIF, this may be understood by the idea that KW's commonly enjoys interesting and challenging work and to continuously develop themselves as described by Mládková, Zouharová, and Nový (2015). Yet, to claim that “*development and improvement is in the DNA of this company*” is to make a strong statement. As if the consultants

that constantly performs on the same level, might be seen as less successful and less likely to move forward in their career. At the same time, *if* improvement comes naturally for consultants at IBM, then they should presumably have nothing to worry about. Yet, people are different individuals and could have different ambitions, still personal development seems to be vital the for career development:

“For me, a career is when you grow as a person, at the same time you take on more responsibility and learn new things.” (Gabrielsson - S.C)

“A career is probably when you feel like you continuously develop yourself, that you don’t stand still.” (Johansson - S.P)

As mentioned by Mládková, Zouharová, and Nový (2015) knowledge workers are seen as ambitious individuals where continuous development is an important aspect. The quotes above thus support this view and the ambition to continuously go further is also highly stressed. They appear to be ambitious individuals with a focus on internal growth and they do not mention money, titles or any external incentives. Which is in line with what KWs search for (Alvesson, 2004).

To summarize this first section, the consultants expressed a rather *romantic* and *idealised* view of having a career where the individual can be seen as a captain of their own sailboat - steering their own career path. Self-fulfilment and personal development was also highly stressed as main ingredients in the making of a career. The consultants thus paint the picture of themselves as knowing in which direction to go and that they possess the ability to influence their careers, since it is based around their own skills and dedication.

4.3 Career planning

The following sections aims to present how career planning can be used in order for the consultants to reach their career aspirations. Career planning could be seen as a rational tool (Phillips, 1997) which the consultants actively use in order to shape their future and to set their career goals. Another side to the story will also be presented later on in this section where the rationality and usefulness of this tool will be questioned.

4.3.1 The supporting view:

Firstly, career planning can be connected to the first section in the empirical material where the individual was responsible for making his career. It seems as that the consultants have a perception of being in control of their own career, consequently it may be possible for them to influence it, and therefore to *plan* it. To begin with, the consultants set their own career goals:

“The [career planning] is made so that I set the goals. So, for example, in the beginning of the year I decide that "I want to achieve this..." In the end, that is what I get measured by.” (Dahlblom - J.C)

"You have to take it into your own hands, to search and find out what you want... You simply base this on yourself, based on your opinions and preferences, which areas you are interested in. /.../ that [the goals] is what you write into a system." (Eklund - S.C)

Given these descriptions, it appears as the consultants have a lot of influence over their planning and their goals. Part of the reasons to have a career planning from the individual's perspective is to get the sense that he is in *control* of his work, thus can try to make sense of it accordingly, as emphasised by DeSimone, Werner and Harris (2002). In this case, for the consultants to explain that they are in charge of setting their goals and what they get evaluated by seems to be one example of taking control over their working life.

“[Career planning is] in a way a process in which one continuously strives to achieve a goal which is to enjoy yourself in work. /.../ [It is] a plan throughout life, to feel like work gives you added value. That work is more than money, and you work to grow as a person instead.” (Bergdahl - J.C)

It seems as if the consultant perceives his career is about to continuously achieve goals that are oriented towards added value at work, which the previous section highlighted. Still, it seems to be a perception that it is possible to plan what the individual strives for through career planning. The consultant appears to have a vision for what to achieve and the career planning serves as a tool to reach it. Yet, these goals appear to be rather vague in their nature. It could be difficult to measure if the goal is achieved, however, it still appears to have a significant role since to have a career plan seems to be helpful for the consultants:

"I definitely think it has been a great, helpful tool /.../ It makes it easier for you to remember, it's not always that easy when you're out in your normal job. You get a little bit busy and lots of other things appear, and to think about this "ahh, career, well how was it now?" so, it creates a lot of clarity." (Johansson - S.P)

The career planning seems to be helpful since it may provide some guiding and “creates a lot of clarity”. Still, if consultants have trouble to remember the goals, how vital could they be? Yet, it appears as the goals can create a form of structure, something to lean on when they get a “bit busy and lots of other things appear” - in other words, when ‘the reality’ hits them. Perhaps the career planning makes the prioritisation easier for the consultants, presumably making them work more strategically since they have a plan to follow. This seem to make it a helpful tool.

"The goals become some kind of synergy with having a personal goal of growing in some sense, and you would like to marry it with a goal that the company has in order to optimize the chances that it will be met." (Isaksson - S.P)

Furthermore, it seems as if the goals in one’s career plan are carefully thought out, strategically chosen in order to maximize their own individual achievement as Phillips (1997) highlights is the fundamental idea for having tools for decision. By ensuring that the personal goals are in alignment with formal goals the impression is that it may give a higher chance of being fulfilled. Thus, the consultant appears have agentic traits, to be analytic - they seem to set their goals carefully, aiming for them to be strategic and realistic but still in their *best interest*.

"You choose to set goals within personal development. So, [it is] very detailed. Which courses I want to attend. What role I want to have. What goals I have for the career within a year. What goals I have for my career within 5 years and 10 years.” (Johansson - S.P)

The career planning seems to provide clarity and structure for the consultant since it maps out what courses he wants to attend in order to develop their skills, what role he wants to have and future career goals. Thus, by planning, it appears as if the consultants know what the future will look like. If they follow the plan, it seems as they have all the possibilities to reach their goals. Overall, this supports the romantic view of a career, that the individual's control their own career and that they are able to plan it accordingly.

Lastly, the idea of planning a career could be seen as a rational tool, implying that the individual is highly active in shaping their future in a strategic way. As if they are the ones that sculpt the reality surrounding their careers. This is in line with current ideas in the career literature (DeSimone, Werner & Harris, 2002; Akkermans & Tims, 2017).

4.3.2 The clashing view:

The following section aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of career planning than what the previous supporting view may have described. Throughout this section, the potential reasons of why the career planning may be less useful for the consultants than literature have suggested will be explored.

“I have a vision /.../ it's very hard to say what the future will look like, but you have a plan and I think the majority have it, however it's not 100% settled.” (Gabrielsson - S.C)

“There is some kind of understanding today, just because you are good at something now, still it's not necessarily that it will be static, that it will look the same the next year. It may look different and we need to learn new things all the time... /.../ You just have to be, go along with it.” (Hallgren - S.C)

The previous section emphasised how the consultants had career plans, the quote above still supports this view by stressing that the consultant has a vision for his career. However, the consultants acknowledge that the future is unpredictable. Thus, it appears to exist a common understanding that is good to perform well today but they will never know what the future demands from them in terms of knowledge and skills. Consequently, they appear to avoid relying too much on their career planning as the goals and demands may change:

“It's difficult to set goals that last throughout the entire year /.../ New opportunities appear almost all the time, I don't know what will happen this fall. “(Forsberg - S.C):

“Changed goals are happening all the time because, it changes so much all the time, from year to year in our industry and organisation. /.../ but as long as you aim upwards, it's still right, even if it may be to the left or right.” (Eklund - S.C)

The difficulty with career plans seems to be to set goals that are possible to maintain throughout the year. The future is unpredictable with seemingly new possibilities presented frequently. Thus, the uncertainties in knowing what is still relevant for one's career advancement may cause difficulties in maintaining a useful career plan. Changes within the industry and organisation may cause different knowledge demands that can make the career plan to be outdated within moments. Then, what is the meaning to have a specific plan for the future when the future is impossible to predict?

“I've given up a little bit on that [to have a career plan], it's, at least at IBM, there are a lot of opportunities, not daily but once a month at least that one has to consider. "Is this the right way to go or not the right way to go?" So, I take the day more as it comes.” (Forsberg - S.C)

It becomes evident that the consultant does not even try to set goals. By stressing that he has given up on it, it appears as he previously tried to plan. Interestingly, these quotes tend to be presented by senior consultants working at IBM for several years. Perhaps they have had the desire to plan their future but realised, new unplanned opportunities will constantly emerge. In other words, it appears to be vital for one's career to be flexible rather than following a specific career plan.

“But you have to give 150% and you've just done the bare minimum”, but I was like, "I've met the requirements, what has been demanded of me" And I don't really know what's expected, it's hard for me to shine when I don't even really know how the role works.” (Cederberg - J.C)

In regard to achieving goals that are relevant for one's career advancement, it seems to be another reality clash, since the consultant's perception of his performance seem to be one thing, while on the other hand, the organisation evaluates him and expresses that the performance is at a bare minimum level. Thus, it seems difficult for the individual to grasp the issue, since the requirements are *perceived to be met* by him. Sultana (2012) highlighted that organisations can have goals that are intended to strategically increase competitiveness, the consequences may however be that employees might blame themselves when they are not successful to manage their career. However, it appears as if the blame is put on the organisation and not on themselves. This may be explained by the thought that they perceive themselves as a highly qualified and autonomous individual, in other words a KW (Newell et al. 2009). As if the consultants may know how to do their work better than the organisation. Still, these organisational goals for the individual seems to create a sense of despondence, rather than to contribute to a successful career. Hall (1986) stated, once a career plan is formulated, the support from the organisation with information concerning the individual's career becomes crucial. It is evident that IBM may be inadequate in this aspect, that it is unclear what is expected of the consultants, resulting in what seems to be more frustration than motivation for the career development.

To summarize, the career planning at IBM could be seen by some individuals as a helpful tool which provides clarity and some kind of structure. One could easily connect this view to the romantic and idealised way of understanding a career where the individual is in charge of their

career development. Based on this section, the career planning is perceived as a tool which enables them to take control of their career and it may give them a sense of safety. However, this view was not supported by all consultants, some of them had a more critical mindset towards career planning. The plans could be problematic to formulate and to actually maintain them throughout the year, since reality is continuously changing and is rather complex.

4.4 Careers in practice - the complex 'reality'

The previous sections provided a picture of an organisation with dedicated, ambitious individuals with a strong desire to shape their career. Still, they were aware of that the future is not predictable and may affect their career plans. In some way, it still appeared as they saw themselves in the driving seat, but had to adjust to some external factors. This chapter aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of career development and a presumably clearer picture of some of the main influencing factors that the consultants do not have a control of.

The senior consultant explains:

“It's not like in school where you have full control /.../ If you put in an effort, you can get a better grade, that is not really how it works in the working life, but there are other outside factors that affect your career. I have understood that many people in the younger generation find it very difficult to understand that, like this, "what, I have done this whole list of things now, I should be promoted now" but there are other factors that affect your career.” (Forsberg - S.C)

It appears as the consultant finds the junior consultants to be slightly naive, as they should expect reality to be far different from the predictable university setting. Still, as recent graduates may be used to the idea that a greater input means a better output, for example with grades, thus there is no surprise that they might expect something similar when entering IBM. However, as the quote stresses, other factors and external circumstances could also influence their careers. Patience and understanding of the complex reality consequently seems to be significant in order to get promoted.

The following sections will hereby present different aspects regarding their work and the impact they may have on the consultant's career. To begin with, we will start broadly and present factors outside the organisation to then narrow it down and go inwards, starting with internal processes before continuing with networking and finally end up with the career lessons.

4.4.1 External factors - the market

One of the influencing factor which affects the consultants' careers could be the market which they are unable to control. This is described below:

“If you really take the next step in your career or not, that's something that me as an individual can't affect, it depends on... If there is a need in the business /.../ It will be addressed then.” (Johansson - S.P)

“Sometimes you want more than the company wants in short term. It is always driven by the market situation, as well as other opportunities to get the right role that will enable for you to grow in your career.” (Isaksson - S.P)

The consultants appear to be unable to control their promotion, thus their career to some extent. The state of the market could affect if the right role emerges for the consultants to advance and prosper in their career. In the end, it seems to come down to business - not for the individuals to be driven or self-fulfilling. This partly puts an end to the romantic view, where the individual is in control, by providing a more complex illustration of career development. Some of the consultants appeared to be less satisfied with them being unable to control the market, for example by claiming that they want more than the company. This signals that they do not always agree with IBM decisions, especially when they affect their career opportunities. Still, the market appears to be an influencing dimension to their careers:

“There is a certain amount, some balance regarding how many people that can be at a high level. You cannot promote everyone to partner, so to speak. [There is a] market uncertainty, limited mobility from being a small country.” (Isaksson - S.P)

“It must be some kind of business case for, in order for you to get promoted, you have to be saleable at the new level ... I would not say that one is completely non-transparent with it, but it's very fussy with that it is like that.” (Forsberg - S.C)

“At IBM, there are some criteria's that you must to meet, but that is not enough, you must also, of course... [It must] be a demand for this role, some business needs, when this is done you move upwards.” (Cederberg - J.C)

Career advancement is seemingly restricted by IBM: s regulation of how many consultants they want to have within the higher levels. The organisation must be able to sell the knowledge the consultant's own on the higher level since it gives a higher salary but also higher charges for the customers. Even though several consultants may meet the requirements for a career advancement, not everyone can be promoted to partner. The need for a business case may therefore clash with the consultants' own plan, if it does not align with the organisation's needs. This indicates that no amount of planning can be effective if the opportunities are not available

as implied by Hall (1986). It seems as if the awareness surrounding the need for a business case for career advancement is not unknown, but there is a vagueness to it. As if the knowledge of this becomes clearer the longer they stay with the firm, since many of these statements come from senior consultants.

4.4.2 Internal factors - processes

It became evident that IBM as a global organisation is characterized by its processes, where the consultant more or less expressed some kind of discontent:

“There is a tool for everything and there is simply a process for everything.”
(Forsberg - S.C)

“[IBM is] a global company, with different processes, different legal standards /.../
It will not go as fast and there is so much politics in everything ... I don't want to, I think it's sad that one has to say so.” (Hallgren - S.C)

There is an indication that within IBM the processes are prominent, thus the organisational structure most likely resembles the form of a knowledge bureau (Alvehus & Kärreman, 2007). For individuals that may be in a junior position, the processes could give a sense of security. If they do not know what to do, it is written down somewhere for them to follow. On the other hand, this may also function as a hinder for KWs that desire autonomy, since the global aspect and all the processes may cause inertia. It is as if the consultants would rather not have the processes, since it seems to slow down the work for highly driven individuals like them. It appears as some consultants find it problematic to deal with the processes:

“[For] some things, one must contact someone, write it down on paper, do something according to a certain process /.../ sometimes it can absolutely be frustrating.” (Dahlblom - J.C)

“It's schizophrenic. Because in some respects, as soon as it comes to promising something, especially in terms of money, it's very, very strict, formal, bureaucratic. /.../ Oh, that's where it's so terrible, it feels like a straightjacket.” (Kjellgren - S.P)

KWs value autonomous work (Newell et al. 2009), however, it seems as if being a knowledge bureau is hindering the consultants to determine how to go about their work. Some aspects of their work are dictated by following standardised framework (Alvehus & Kärreman, 2012) and specific process, this seems to deprive the consultants of the possibility of autonomy and could cause frustration. Thus, to have highly skilled and driven KWs and then not give them the ability to be responsible for simple tasks is seemingly counterproductive. Yet, the contrast between

their autonomous work and the strictly formal aspects of the organisation may cause conflict with the consultants, since their only choice seems to be to give in and to adjust to the process:

“If you want to get somewhere, you have to be *very persistent* and work against this system. When I was on this recent course, the leadership course, I created a bit of a revolt in this course because I began to talk about this topic. So, there were so many people who said, "I'm tired of this, I'm tired!" /.../ Some people just want to do what they are good at, they don't want to deal with all the shit. /.../ There are very few people which this works on, if I have to be honest.” (Cederberg - J.C)

Now it appears as if to be driven is not sufficient, to be highly persistent seems more in line with having to work within the limitations of the processes in order to achieve career advancement. Many of the consultant may have had a certain view of how it is to work as a consultant. Ideas that their knowledge is in focus, that the organisation cherishes their talent and the possibilities for self-fulfilment and high status (Walumbwa, Christensen, & Hailey, 2011; Alvesson, 2004) may existed before entering the organisation. However, once they have been hired and get in contact with the organisational bureaucracy and processes, it appears to clash with their social construction of what it means to be a KW. It may also be contradicting to their perception of that a career is determined by the individual.

“I had an idea that I wanted to be [a project manager] earlier /.../ I still want to, but I don't want to be it in the existing process of being a project manager.” (Johansson - S.P)

The consultants tend to have a plan for what they may desire career wise, on the other hand, the existing organisational career possibilities are seemingly not always a perfect match to the plans. The consultant above has had an idea of becoming a project manager, however the interest was lost due to the existing processes within IBM. The reality of the processes may compel the consultants to revise their planning. How will they be able to achieve career advancement when it is not in line with what the organisation offers? Still, it appears as if some aspects of the processes do not even function as intended:

“There is one of those cv database, a sort of website where all so-called 'open seats' /.../ The problem is that 80% of these open positions are already appointed before they are posted... People have someone in their mind /.../ Then the processes say that you have to post an open position, but when people are searching for these open positions, they only get the answer back that it's already been taken, even though it was uploaded one hour ago.” (Forsberg - S.C)

In order for the consultants to gain valuable skills and knowledge and to continue on their own career path, there is a tool provided by IBM where positions are published which appears to

work unsatisfactorily. Then, how are the consultants supposed to plan their career and set goals when the tool for achieving them through attaining positions to some extent is not functioning? The existing process by which the work should comply to in theory does not work accordingly in practise. For the individual that may be slightly naive or unaware of this may therefore obviously set themselves up for a less successful career.

4.4.2.1 The promotion process

As stated previously, within IBM there are processes for everything, to get a promotion is no exception. What this process looks like is described by the following quotes:

“We have band [levels], when I’ve reached a new band, as you say, you have prepared a solid work in advance. You have clear goals in different areas. Then to go upwards, I have to provide evidence to show that I have achieved this.”
(Johansson - S.P)

“You have to provide evidence to prove that you can meet the requirements that are needed [to get a promotion] and the requirements are quite loose. It is very, they are written in a way which makes it possible to achieve them in a variety of ways. /.../
So, it may be that any person at IBM could achieve these goal with their regular tasks.” (Bergdahl - J.C)

For the consultants to advance, to reach a new band level, they need to make a solid documentation of what they have achieved and how the required organisational goals for a career advancement have been fulfilled. However, since tacit knowledge may be difficult to grasp and formulate (Mládkováa, Zouharováb & Nový, 2015) the requirement of making it into evidence to support one’s career may be ambiguous, thus challenging. Is it even possible to have documentation which gives a correct representation of the knowledge the employees possess? How do we know that their *expertise* is the driving factor for their career advancement and no other elements disconnected from their skills or knowledge? Due to the ambiguity of knowledge, the organisation may not be able to set specific requirements, consequently they may have to set them in a loose way. Thus, how meaningful may they be in the end, if they seemingly can be achieved by anyone? Still, the formalities surrounding the documentations seems to be a source of complaints:

“[To get to the next band level is] where I have to give up to three different evidences of how I've done. The rational part is just so...” Yes, but oh my God, oh, come on, do I have to spend time on this?""" (Hallgren - S.C)

“The challenge is definitely, the biggest one is the time it takes [to prepare for a promotion]. It really takes time to find 80 hours a year. It is impossible when you simultaneously have requirements to work for a customer for x number of hours at the same time.” (Eklund - S.C)

It appears as the consultants find the processes to be rather problematic, especially the amount of time it requires. This preparation process is done during work hours and consequently other tasks may get stuck in between. Thus, to focus on their career the way IBM intended to may be stressful. Yet, this is not something they do every day, but 80 hours a year could still be tough to squeeze in their regular schedule and the consultants appear to question the rationality of this. Apart from this, it also seems as the consultants need to have a clear understanding of *how* the processes function in order to advance in their careers:

“If I manage to navigate through IBM. /.../ I mean, like, to understand how things and such work, both processes, like how do you even get promoted or what the structure looks like between different types... Who initiates a sale, who delivers and again, different processes and a little bit of how the culture works.” (Dahlblom - J.C)

Especially the junior consultant stress the importance of understanding how things work, which may not be surprising at all, since he has not been working at IBM for a long period of time. Still, by highlighting that he has to “navigate through IBM”, it implies that it is a rather complex system within the organisation. Thus, to have a clear career plan may be questionable, since other aspects such as knowing who initiates sales and the promotion process in practice may get in the way and could be even more vital than to have an individual plan.

“Well, one challenge is, it's all of these processes, so I think, if you easily get tired, it's probably easy for you to quite at IBM, that you feel like, no this isn't going through, “I'm never getting promoted, I don't know what I'm doing wrong.” (Forsberg - S.C)

The processes themselves could be challenging. Yet, it seems as part of being successful in regards of one's career at IBM, is to be good at handling these processes. To learn how they function could probably take some time and people who are unable to learn may see them as a too great of an obstacle to overcome. Sometimes it may be less about the consultant's actual work at a client and more of how they actually handle the formal processes:

“Then there are those who have an enormous dedication but may be quite an entrepreneurial person who doesn't like the processual steps that much. So, they can do really good things and they can act at a very high level and can argue against their managers "check out all of these good things I have done, shouldn't I, like make a career and go up in band level, become a partner or something? Quite

frankly, it does not work like that, instead you have to go through certain formal processes to be qualified and if you don't, you won't be seen. You won't be heard and then you will not reach a new band level by definition. This can be quite frustrating for some people.” (Isaksson - S.P)

It becomes apparent that even though the individual may be highly driven, skilled and accomplishes a great deal, career advancement will not come automatically. The consultants must go through the processes in order to be *seen* and *heard* through the official way. Individuals that may not like the processes and struggle with them, but still desire to advance within their career, could therefore find themselves lost in a career limbo. The possibility to act and determine their own career path is not given to the individual, once again. The processes appear to set the framework for their careers:

“You have to understand the processes at IBM. How to "play with them", so to speak. /.../ I have actually seen, when we bring in new people who come from smaller consultancy firms and place them at a fairly senior level, they have a pretty big problem to understand these processes.” (Forsberg - S.C)

In the end, to know the processes appears to be vital in order for the consultants to advance in their careers. Even though a consultant may be experienced in their field, it seems to come down to know how to handle the processes. Thus, junior and senior consultants who recently joined IBM may be less insightful and less equipped to develop their careers.

4.4.3 Networking

“There are some courses that you can take about how different processes at IBM work. I feel they are not so good, but the easiest way [to do things] is not to give up... Because, it usually works out in the end, you just have to contact the right people.” (Forsberg - S.C)

In other words, one way to deal with the processes that the previous section highlighted is through having the right connections and to build networks. The following section will therefore emphasise the importance of networking in order for the consultants to go forward in their career.

“To get the knowledge you need to reach the next band level and to gain experience, I think it's so much easier if you have the contacts.” (Dahlblom - J.C)

Networks can enable for knowledge and information to be shared, as mentioned by Scheidegger (2012) and Newell et al. (2009). By using one's network to gain valuable knowledge that is relevant for career advancement, it may become easier for the consultants to move forward

while attempting to plan for their own future. Therefore, networking may be a valuable source for career advancement, still there are seemingly dilemmas in regard to the networking:

“Of course, you want to know everyone or the best scenario would be if you were friends with everyone, but it doesn’t work like that in practice. You are pretty limited with time.” (Ahlström - J.C)

“I have to be smart and conscious, and get a vibe of the person. I like this person but will this give me something in the direction I want to go?” (Cederberg - J.C)

Once again, agentic traits such as being analytical (Mollaret & Miraucourt, 2016) and to have the desire to shape their lives (Bandura, 2006) are emphasised among the consultants. Networks seems to be significant aspects, still they stress the strategic side of it and evaluates the importance of specific relationships. It appears as if the relationships are graded on a scale, where the aspect of how beneficial the individual will be for the consultant’s career development is in focus. In reality, you cannot know everyone, thus to make wise choices could facilitate for better support regarding their careers.

“We have a lot of processes and tools for this and it doesn't work very well, but it's still necessary to dare to pick up the phone and make a few calls and talk to people basically.” (Forsberg - S.C)

“The network is an institution at IBM, I'm not kidding. Then you will get in touch with people to solve this. At IBM, since it's a big company with so many different roles, then every person is specialized or can do something. That's what I mean, your network is an institute. "Do you want to solve this, you can solve it then.” (Cederberg - J.C)

Even though IBM seems to have a reasonable amount of processes that the consultants should work within, the connections with others is also emphasised. The two aspects - processes and connections appears to be the opposite in terms of ways to achieve career success. One way to overcome the potential shortcomings with the formalities is consequently through relationships, which appears to matter in the end. The network can also function as an institute which one of the consultants described. It implies that the networks may serve as a tool that could be seen as established to enable for better connections within the large global organisation.

“[To network] it is an extremely big advantage to be able to do it. They push internally that you should be good at it. Personally, I’ve had the experience, to be able to jump into projects and things, just by having the network or getting to know someone.” (Eklund - S.C)

“I have so many contacts that in one way or another, I would be able to ingratiate myself into [a new project].” (Hallgren - S.C)

Furthermore, to be a skilled networker appears to be promoted within the organisation since the benefits of just knowing people may weigh heavier in some occasions regarding their development. Thus, to know the “right” people within the organisation seems to be an optimal way for the consultants to get desired projects, since it opens up for opportunities that may not have been possible without networking. It appears as if the longer the consultants have worked with the organisation, the more networking becomes the apparent way to find what interests them. Thus, to plan the career then appears to become superfluous, instead they may rely on their networks when they want to achieve their goals.

“So being flexible and open and whatever, that would be the most important things in order to make a career. And then become buddy with a partner, it's really important...” (Cederberg - J.C)

Instead of planning the career, another approach seems to be to “go with the flow”, to simply be flexible and adjust to the situation. What the future has in store for them is unknown, still, unexpected rewarding opportunities may emerge. However, networks are still highlighted as crucial to consider. Yet, this time it appears to be described with a rather critical undertone. By stressing that it is important to know a partner, it implies that the right connections are everything, presumably not the consultants’ knowledge or skills. To some extent, it seems as consultants at IBM is rather dependent on their connections:

“I knew who these senior people, that you need to get approval of and such, were. So, I had some good preconditions /.../ this has then probably opened up more and more doors.” (Hallgren - S.C)

“Now I knew our HR manager /.../ It was a lot about that, that she already knew me already, but normally you're applying for the role.” (Johansson - S.P)

Some consultants provided practical examples of the importance to know people in order to get a specific position and to get new opportunities. By knowing someone with authority, it appears as they could go around the process of applying, thus making it less complicated for themselves. Yet, one cannot help to wonder, how often does this happen? How many individuals use the formal way to appoint a new position instead of this informal?

Still, the manager could be supportive when the consultants are looking for new project:

“It's very important that the manager is good. /.../ that he can post it in his network [that you are searching for projects].” (Gabrielsson - S.C)

“If not even your boss knows these processes, then I'd say you're in trouble, that they [the managers] don't know how to ‘play with these processes’.” (Forsberg S.C)

One important relationship seems to be the consultant's manager, both in terms of providing assistance to find new projects and to guide them through the processes. As a previous section emphasised, it appears to be a need at IBM to know how the processes functions. Thus, to have a manager with the knowledge of how processes can be understood could be beneficial. The consultants’ mentor which most of them had, could also be significant for their career development:

“One of the important roles of the mentors at IBM is to provide support in this process of advance in band levels and to write evidence and to read through them and to provide constructive criticism. So, I've done this in those cases when I've reach a new band, that I've taken lots of help from my mentor who has read through [the evidence] and supported me, and like that.” (Johansson - S.P)

“Every time one will go up a career level, you have to write almost an essay about why you deserve this and they [the mentors] have apparently done something good, /.../ So there are plenty of tips which you receive then [from the mentors].” (Eklund - S.C)

As highlighted in the theoretical chapter, mentors are seen as valuable resources for sharing knowledge with less experienced peers (Hall, 1989; Young et al, 2006, cited in Mankin, 2009; Pfund, 2016) and this perception is supported by the consultants. To have a mentor at IBM is perceived as an important asset which has the knowledge and skills to assist the consultants in their career advancement. Still, as previously described, there is a rigid set of processes at IBM, and to create a mentorship relationships are no exception:

“If I should be completely honest, this tool for mentors and mentees, well, I have not directly been in there and searched, instead /.../ [I have gone] through my network.” (Gabrielsson - S.C)

Once again, it appears as the process for achieving a specific aspect within IBM is less useful in practice than in theory. The networks thus seem to serve as a replacement for some of the less effective processes. Still, the networks may also provide valuable knowledge for the consultants about how to develop their careers. Yet, there are other lessons to be learned regarding career development which the following section will present.

4.4.4 Career lessons

The final section aims to share what the consultants have learned from working at IBM in terms of their career development. By working within the organisation for a long period of time, the consultants gain more experience, they may also, in one way or another learn a lesson or two. Consequently, the voice of the senior consultants will be the most prominent during this section. To begin, the time aspect appears to be a significant factor in order for them to advance in their careers:

“Things sometimes take a bit of time since it's a big company. /.../ I think there are many people who are annoyed about it, who want things to happen now. /.../ I cannot really say that there is a culture of patience more than, I think once you've been here for a while, you realize that this is how things are working.” (Johansson - S.P)

“The trick is to be a little bit patient... “(Forsberg - S.C)

In a fast-changing environment it seems as if plenty of the new consultants have entered the organisation with the perception that things within the organisation will be equally rapid. The trick appears to be patient as the senior consultants described. The sooner the consultants realise that they have entered a global organisation, where time-consuming processes exist, the better. Thus, to want things to happen instantaneously as one may intend, cannot be expected. Some things simply take time and cannot be rushed:

“Somewhere you need to build your foundation and spend a number of years at each level. In the beginning, it may be quite fast, well, it is because the first levels are quite easily reachable. It's more about creating your own base by going from university and start to work, but hurry slowly.” (Isaksson - S.P)

Apart from the time aspect when focusing on one's career, it appears to be important to take the time to build a strong foundation, to have a solid knowledge base. As the consultants advance further in their careers, it seems as the demands increase, hence they will need to be well prepared. To rush towards the next promotion does not seem to be possible, rather for them to take their time and focus on gaining knowledge and improve themselves.

However, some of the junior consultant expressed another view, presumably since they have less experience from working at IBM:

“You *really* have to, well you have to be persistent and some people just want to focus on what they are good at, like me anyway. "So, shit, I'm good at this, I'm very motivated and all of this." Then I'm sitting and banging my head against this kind of system, organisation. Some companies make it easy for the individual and create a structure that empowers the individual. IBM has a structure that empowers the leadership, the ones at the top, that is how I feel.” (Cederberg - J.C)

“I know others who thought that it has been tardy that you have to spend time on such things. There are also those who really don't like this at all.” (Bergdahl - J.C)

It appears as if the aspect of being patient comes with time spent within the organisation, since the junior consultants were more subjected to express themselves negatively. The clash between expectations and reality becomes visible within the statements above. Some may anticipate a work environment where they can prosper, to be empowered, be the essence of a KW and to do what they are good at with high motivation. On the other hand, once they are inside the organisation, the sense of empowerment does not appear to exist. The perception is that empowerment is given to the more senior consultants. This may be a reason why our senior consultants do not express the same frustration; they have climbed up the ladder and have learned one or two things of how to get things done:

“Everything can be done at IBM, you only need to know how, and the aspect of how, that is what takes a very long time to learn.” (Forsberg - S.C)

“You shouldn't be Don Quixote who fights against windmills at IBM. One should dare to challenge and not always ‘go in the corral’, so to speak. Nor should you fight against the processes for the sake of fighting. Many who have joined from smaller companies or similar and have had a different expectation from the beginning, we have replaced them pretty quickly so to speak. They have not found a natural spot in the organisation.” (Isaksson - S.P)

From a senior point of view, everything seems to be possible with IBM, they just have to know *how*. Still, if the consultants have been working at IBM for several years, for them to pick up some “tips and tricks” along the way seems as a natural dimension of their career. Continuous learning is a common feature for KWs (Mládková, Zouharová & Nový, 2015), consequently to learn about how the organisation works may also be included in that dimension. Furthermore, it appears to be vital for the consultants to adapt to the organisation and to find their “natural” spot, or the position that IBM prefers, since it is perceived as pointless to fight against the machinery at IBM. For the consultants to realise and accept the processes may ensure for a less frustrated career path.

Still as stressed above, the consultants should also dare to be challenging. In what sense could then be questioned, since they should also follow the rigid set processes at IBM. Thus, it appears to be a balancing act between fitting in and standing out, which especially new consultants seem to be less good at. Still, they also need to acknowledge the context they operate in:

“It's an American company /.../ So it's important to actually sell oneself, to really sell yourself and not be too, or what to say, be "too Swedish" *laughs*, too moderate.” (Eklund - S.C)

In the end, IBM is a global American company which may affect several aspects of the organisation such as the processes, but also what is valued, thus important for career advancements. Still, it seems to be crucial to be able to adapt to the organisational standards. Consequently, to be flexible and open appears to be key element for career development. To meet expectations by adjusting their approach may also enable for a more successful career, as indicated above. Furthermore, what became evident throughout this section is that the senior consultants seemed to have developed several career lessons during their years at IBM. Career development may be far more complex than what they first thought when entering the organisation. Therefore, the junior consultants may have a slightly different understanding of their career development after a couple of years at IBM.

To summarize the careers in practice section, several aspects seem to affect the consultants career. Some of these, such as the market which they are not able to influence and the processes to some extent. Yet, one way to overcome the difficulties surrounding the processes was through networks and by gaining career lessons from working at IBM. The understanding of how the organisation works and the need for flexibility seems to be vital dimensions for the consultants when developing their careers.

5. Discussion

The empirical material presented in the previous section emphasises several aspects of the consultant's career such as the career planning. Part of the reasons to have a career planning is for individuals to set career goals and try to make sense of their work life (Gould, 1979; DeSimone, Werner & Harris, 2002). Still, in practice, the significance of a career plan and its functionalities is seemingly downplayed by other factors. These were further explored in our empirical material and will serve as vital elements for presenting a more nuanced understanding of how the consultants make sense of their careers. To continue, the following discussion will partly follow the same structure as the previous chapter illustrated, starting with the romantic view.

5.1 The romantic view of a career

It seems to exist a clear picture of what a career means among the consultants at IBM. As stated by our interviewees, it is up to the individual to create their own situation. They seem to believe that they are the ones that influence their career and in which direction they would like to go. They seem to share a view that is close in line with career literature which emphasise the individual as the driving force for their success (Akkermans & Tims, 2017; Ceschi et al. 2016). It also appeared throughout the empirical material that the consultants value learning and continuous development, which are some the characteristic of KWs mentioned by Mládková, Zouharová and Nový (2015).

Still, self-fulfilment may be an underlying desire which affects their career ambitions, since several consultants expressed a devotion to do what they want and to find the place where their skills and competences matter, with development constantly in their mind. It seems as the consultants show examples of being independent and proactive in their careers, thus showing agentic traits as described by Mollaret and Miraucourt (2016) and Bandura (2006). This gives a voluntaristic view of the consultant's perception of career development, as if the consultant has the dedication and will to go further in their career - everything appears to be possible to achieve.

Overall, the consultants express themselves in a rather optimistic light where they emphasise their own abilities and mindset as a solution to their career advancement. These perceptions portray a seemingly *romantic* and *idealised* view of how the consultants make sense of their careers. One may wonder if this is how the consultants understand the meaning of having a

career, or if they want their careers to be in the same idealized manner. It may also be explained by that the consultants sometimes feel like they are no longer in control due to the seemingly strict processes at IBM and external factors such as the market. Thus, to express themselves in this manner may be a way to reclaim some control, to feel autonomous, as an independent thinker - in other words, to feel more like a KW (Alvesson, 2004; Walumbwa, Christensen, & Hailey, 2011). It may empower them, making them feel slightly more optimistic and in charge of their destiny. However, as indicated, the presented view could be seen as too simplistic, making it rather naive to believe that this idealised view illustrates the whole picture. By looking closer into this matter, a more complex view is starting to emerge which will be discussed in the following sections, starting with the career planning.

5.2 The functionality of career planning

By having a specific career plan, the consultants appear to use it as a source for support. It seems to create guidelines for them to stay on track and make sense of their career which is in line with DeSimone, Werner and Harris (2002) ideas. Thus, it appears as a career plan is seen as a supportive tool, however, it could be seemingly shallow description, since our empirical material highlighted a discrepancy in the functionality of a career plan in practice.

Even though an effort is put into using the tool by the consultants, the uncertainty of reality still seems to weigh heavier, and may undermine the intention of having a career plan. There is a shared perception that the consultants do not know what is in hold for them, therefore, it becomes more difficult to plan, or to be in control of what they should do career wise. The consultants' aspirations and goals appear to change continuously. Thus, in practice, the idea of planning the career seems to be given up by some of the consultants due to the unpredictable nature of the future. This may provide a rather contrasting view to what Hall (1986) argues, he emphasises that to *not* plan might result in difficulties to respond to career activities. However, our empirical material shows rather the opposite, to not plan enables them to act accordingly as new career opportunities emerge. During our interviews, it became evident that this view was shared by the consultants.

Consequently, for the consultants to plan their career may be ineffective, because in the end, it tends to be slightly overlooked because of the unpredictable nature of the future. The environment is fast changing (Baruch, 2004), which results in a need to continuously revise the personal career plan. It awakens the question of what use one may have of creating a plan, other than to create an illusion of being in control of one's life? Is it even possible to plan ahead of

something we know nothing about? Still, as emphasised by Law (2001), everything is only about probabilities and not certainties. Consequently, to plan a career at all maybe should be reconsidered.

Instead of planning, most of our interviewees highlight the aspect of being open-minded towards new possibilities. Consequently, to be flexible and to be able to make career decisions whereupon opportunities emerge could provide a more nuanced description of what is significant for their career development. This may be due to the characteristics of a KW and knowledge itself. The tacit knowledge KW's possess is difficult to grasp and to separate from the individual (Mládková, Zouharová & Nový, 2015). Knowledge may therefore be problematic to formulate and specify into a particular goal or plan. KWs are also characterised by their continuous improvement where the strive for knowledge is valued (Mládková, Zouharová & Nový, 2015). Therefore, this adds to the uncertainty of planning since knowledge is highly ambiguous (Alvesson, 2004) and may continuously change in many aspects, where new knowledge is created while other becomes obsolete. Thus, a career should maybe be looked upon as a continuous process rather than a fixed plan.

5.3 Influencing career dimensions

Once the fundamental idea of a career was discussed in depth, it seems as the perception of the individuals as highly responsible for their career success, the agency lost some of its significance. As if the consultants' idealised and romantic view of a career in practise gives in to the complexity of reality. To control their future career and have the understanding that the careers evolves around the consultants themselves may consequently be slightly misleading. Then, on the contrary to the idea of a rational career plan, several other significant aspects emerged throughout the empirical material which will be discussed further on in this chapter.

5.3.1 The state of the market

It seems as external factors such as the market creates the preconditions, thus affect the possibilities for the consultants' career advancement. The consultants emphasised that there needs to be a business case to be able to attain new projects, since experience through a specific project is often required in order to advance in one's career. Consequently, if the external factors do not create favourable preconditions, career advancement on an individual level seems to be challenging, therefore problematic to plan. Thus, in order to understand what influences the career, one may have to expand his horizon, acknowledging the bigger picture. The consultants

career is probably not created in a vacuum, instead, to some extent, the market seems to set the playing field for what can be achieved. The ability to shape the entire career therefore appears to lie outside the consultants' reach, if the market opportunity is not right, in their favour. Overall, this contradicts the idea that the individual is in the centre of his career development and success, as emphasised by Ceschi et al. (2016) and Akkermans and Tims (2017).

5.3.2 Organisational and promotion processes

On an organisational level, the career challenges seem to be surrounded by a rigid set of processes and standardisation. Throughout our interviews, it occurred that the understanding of these organisational processes, especially for career advancement could be seen as even more important, rather than to plan the career. If an individual does not have the knowledge of how an organisation operates, it could be challenging to know how to advance in their career as several consultants expressed. Yet, as KWs are seen as autonomous (Alvesson, 2004; Newell et al. 2009) and ambitious individuals (Mládková, Zouharová & Nový, 2015), the formal processes may become an obstacle. The standardised framework, which is common in knowledge bureaus (Alvehus & Kärreman, 2012), could therefore be perceived as limiting the consultant's independence and consequently may hinder their development. This was indicated by the consultants through the expressions that their performance may not always be enough in order to advance in one's career. In some respects, the understanding of the promotion process seems to be significant for career advancement and the consultants stressed that even though the processes were perceived as a piece of work, still to go through them is inevitable.

5.3.3 Networking

Apart from acknowledging the importance of understanding the processes, to create networks within the organisation seems to be important for the consultants, which corresponds to what Alvesson (2004) emphasises is significant for KWs.

The consultants emphasised that the information within their network is seen as an important source of attaining valuable knowledge. Due to the complexity and ambiguity regarding knowledge, the social network is a way to ensure that knowledge is spread and which could encourage the consultants' career development (Newell et al. 2009; Scheidegger, 2012). The knowledge which the consultant attains from the network, such as managers and mentors can therefore contribute to their career advancement as in line with Forett and Dougherty (2004) and Crawshaw and Game (2015). However, it seems as if a skilled manager in contrast to the

view given by Hill (1989), nowadays is to assist in the progression of advancement by providing information on what channels to use, rather than to provide feedback to assist the individual's self-assessment. This could be explained by that KWs are highly educated individuals (Newell et al. 2009) and independent thinkers (Walumbwa, Christensen, & Hailey, 2011) which may not require assistance for assessing one's skills.

Still, throughout the interviews it became evident that the consultants seem to associate career advancement with being a skilled networker. Yet, to network with *everyone* may not be an option since the amount of time it requires, as expressed during the interviews, and the fact that IBM is a large global organisation makes it impossible. Thus, to be 'smart' and thoughtful when forming, but also evaluating existing connections appear to be something the consultants engage in. Still, as Scheidegger (2012) argues, by having strong connections, knowledge sharing takes place easier. Furthermore, to know people or who to contact could be a way to overcome some of the shortcomings with the processes as described earlier.

5.3.4 Career lessons

Lastly, during the interviews with the senior consultants it came across as if patience is a virtue at IBM. The consultants seem to be affected by the numbers of years spent within the organisation, the more senior level - the greater understanding of how things work and what plays a bigger role for their career development, for example, the importance of being patient. As if by working within IBM for a long period provides the individual with a more realistic view of the time needed for career development.

It occurred as the aspect of time is significant factor which needs to be taken into consideration when aiming for career advancement. Even though the individuals may have ambitious plans, the time it takes to get there should not be forgotten. This appears to be more easily realised by the senior consultants, that it is possible to move forward, but it could take time and requires a strong foundation. They seem to provide a rather nuanced understanding, while on the other hand, the junior consultants may be less inclined to fully comprehend the significance of time.

Yet, as Baruch (2004) argues, we live in a fast-changing global market, this view may affect one's understanding of a career. Other reoccurring statements in our society may be that careers are viewed: as boundaryless, more achievable and accessible, full of possibilities or as that improvisation is a frequent occurring element in the career development (Baruch, 2004; Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005; Sparrow, Brewster & Dickmann, 2008; Sennett, 2006). These can

be seen as contributing factors that may influence the consultants view of career advancements. The junior consultant could probably be more influenced by such ideas, while the senior may have come to terms with ‘reality’ - how things actually work at IBM. However, it can also be questionable, if wisdom always comes with experience. The senior consultants could maybe be stuck in a rut and be less inclined to think outside the box sometimes. Still, one cannot know for sure, but a critical point of view, no matter if the consultant is senior or junior could be applied.

Moreover, another aspect which our empirical material highlighted was the importance of acknowledging the organisational context, such as the size and structure for which they want to pursue a successful career within. Large global firms such as IBM are typically characterised by heterogeneity and their complexity (Busco et al. 2008). This could be beneficial to take into consideration, and may contribute to the complex understanding of what affects a career. To be aware of that some conceptions may trickle down from the head office in the US might result in differences when understanding the organisation and how to advance one's career.

In the end, IBM is a global American organisation and to be “too Swedish”, as the consultants seemed to associate with being moderate, may not be the most suitable way to conform to. Instead, there seems to be an overall focus to be able to sell oneself as a qualified consultant, which may apply both externally to their customers and internally at IBM. Even though the consultants may try to portray themselves in a favourable light, to be able to ‘sell oneself’ could be problematic since the consultants could struggle to formulate the knowledge they possess and to show their accomplishments. This may be due to one aspect mentioned a numerous time - that knowledge is ambiguous (Alvesson, 2004). Throughout our empirical material, the consultants emphasised the importance of formulating the promotion documents and evidence in a specific way to show why they should reach a new band-level. Thus, for the consultants to be able to *articulate* their knowledge seems to be highly valuable for their career advancement.

5.4 Contradicting career perceptions

During the previous discussion, we aimed to emphasise the different perspectives the consultants may have when making sense of a career. This will be summarized in the following model which gives an illustration of how the romantic view of a career did not align with the complexity of careers in practice.

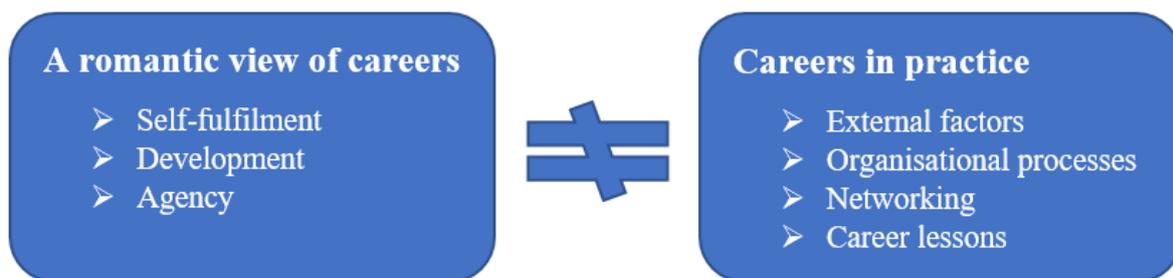


Figure 5.4.1 Contradictive career sensemaking

The complexities of reality may create clashes between the *romantic ideal* and *careers in practice*. The former takes a stance in a rather simplistic and optimistic view where the individual is seen as the one who has all the opportunities to shape his career. Thus, it seems to exist agentic traits among the consultants, such as being independent and self-organising. Furthermore, a significant dimension which the consultants described was the importance of being *dedicated*, which seemed to be their recipe for career advancement. To have the will and dedication almost appeared to be enough for consultants when they wanted to move upwards in their career. The consultants also associated self-fulfilment with the meaning of a career and to constantly develop himself. In other words, they presented a romantic view of how a career can be understood.

On the other hand, another view became evident which acknowledges the complexity of reality. When the consultants aim to move upwards in their career, our previous discussion highlighted several aspects *apart from their own dedication*, which affect their career. For example: market demands, business needs, the understanding of internal processes, the importance of networks, time aspects and the acknowledgements of the organisational context etc. In other words, there are many dimensions worth to consider, or perhaps even vital to consider if one aims to advance in their career. The consultants may consequently have to shift their focus from themselves and expand their view. Still, we do not argue that consultants individual input and mindset should be neglected, instead we propose a more nuanced understanding of a career. That the individual

has an active role in his career development, however, that other influencing factors could be highly valuable to acknowledge in a complex environment.

5.5 Theoretical contribution

The future appears to be unpredictable to plan for and careers in practice are characterised by a high-level of complexity. Consequently, to realise that career planning may not be as simplistic and straightforward, rational as in theory, guides us towards a more open and flexible view of understanding a career and career development. We hereby present our theoretical contribution which first will be explained and then the implications of it will be discussed:



Figure 5.5.1 The processual career approach

The processual career approach aims to raise our discussion to a more theoretical level and provide a more nuanced understanding of a career and the essential dimensions for career advancement. As our empirical material emphasised, it becomes evident that the individual is operating in a complex environment where various factors need to be taken into consideration simultaneously. Our figure thus highlights how different aspects influence the individual's' career. The subheadings in the figure aims to provide clarity by giving examples. Still, depending on the structure and size of the organisation, the influential aspects may vary, since the model is only based on the circumstances at IBM.

Our approach contributes with a more comprehensive view of a career and provides an understanding of that several aspects related to career development could be interconnected, and not separated. In other words, our model aims to illustrate the complexity of a career and that the individual may be less influential than previously described in career literature. Consequently, the processual career approach contributes with a theoretical understanding of this phenomena.

From our empirical material, we draw the conclusion that as a KW working at IBM, it seems important to be adjustable to one's surrounding since other external and internal aspects, such as the market, organisational processes and networks plays a bigger part than formerly known. Thus, indicating that the individual is not in complete control of their career as first suggested by the consultants. Instead it is highlighted that the consultants need to have an understanding for the bigger picture, realising the complexities surrounding career development and what dimensions may have an influence. Thus, to be *thoughtfully flexible* - to be adaptable and make decisions with consideration to individual career aspirations, may be the characteristic which will enable for better opportunities to achieve career advancement. Throughout our empirical material, the consultants give the impression that they continuously adjust to the opportunities that occur within IBM, still with consideration of what career aspirations they may have.

Hence to be *thoughtfully flexible* involves the ability to act and adapt to existing circumstances. This should be with consideration to previous mentioned aspects and with reflections of how their actions could contribute to their own career advancement. For example, if a consultant experience difficulties within his career, instead of struggling to stay on the same track, to be thoughtfully flexible may instead contribute for individuals to be open for new opportunities that could allow them to advance and develop themselves. One way this could be done is through their network - they can gain new knowledge of how things are done, or *who* to contact if they face a certain obstacle. Thoughtfully flexible also comprises opportunities altogether, where new career possibilities may present themselves everywhere. Still, the individual should keep in mind what aspirations he has in order to evaluate if the upcoming opportunity is of any personal relevance.

The usefulness of this processual career approach can be explored through different levels, such as the individual, organisational and societal one. To start, individuals could use this model to make sense of their careers, as a way to acknowledge the complexities of a career. This view takes away some of the weight to succeed within their career from the individual, by

highlighting that several dimensions influencing their career are outside of their control. Our approach aims to assist with the understanding of an existing link between the individual and context, which is deficient in current literature (Ng & Feldman, 2014; Gina Giau, 2016). By adopting a thoughtfully flexible mindset, they can acknowledge the existing limitations in their environment, but still adjust to these and aim to do the best of the circumstances.

The usefulness of the processual career approach may be increasingly significant for a KW in a KIF to make sense of their careers. The KW's main competence is their knowledge (Alvesson, 2004) which may be the fundament for their careers. Yet, tacit knowledge is difficult to define and ambiguous in its nature, thus challenging to formulate into writing (Alvesson, 2004). To overcome the problematics of formulating a career plan based on their source of knowledge, the use of a processual career approach may be especially useful since it acknowledges the complex and ambiguous nature of a career. Hence, the traditional career planning should maybe be left behind, since these aspects are often not taken into account when the plan is formulated.

If a KIF adopts to this approach and communicates the essence of it to its employees, it may provide them with a deeper understanding towards unforeseen event that may affect their career, that otherwise may have caused frustration. For recent graduates, especially, it may give a better understanding of that careers in practice can be seen as highly complex. Overall, it might contribute to a feeling of more transparency within the company, since some of the dimensions we discovered were less apparent than others and may need more attention, thus a better understanding. Still, it may exist a rather simplistic view of career within some organisations, as our material indicated, our findings thus aim to highlight the complexity of careers and contribute to some form of enlightenment. Consequently, to be thoughtfully flexible could be a helpful way to deal with the career complexity.

Still, other forms of organisations than KIFs may also find this approach useful in order to make sense of their career development. After all, we live in a time with a more global labour market with less boundaries (Baruch, 2004; Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005), where opportunities may be unforeseeable, hence to be thoughtfully flexible could be highly suitable.

6. Conclusion

To begin this chapter, we will provide a brief recap of our research and then continue with presenting our main findings. Lastly, we will bring up suggestions for further research in the career field.

We have looked closer into how consultants at IBM make sense of their careers by exploring the significance of their career planning and how they understand the meaning of a career. Yet, throughout our semi-structured interviews, other distinguishing themes regarding their career also emerged. Thus, we realised that the meaning of a career could be seemingly more complex than the idealised picture the consultants firstly described. By asking follow up questions and asking about the subject of career, a more nuanced picture became evident. This understanding became the foundation for our theoretical contribution, the processual career approach. As previously described, it highlights the complexities surrounding careers.

6.1 Main findings

Our aim with this section is consequently to answer our following research questions:

- *How do consultants at IBM make sense of their career in the knowledge intensive firm?*
 - *What role does the career planning play for the consultants' career development?*
 - *Which dimensions affect the consultants' career development?*

6.1.1 The romantic and idealised career view

Our research has emphasised that the meaning of a career could be seen in a romantic and idealised way. The individual above all was illustrated as *shaping his career*, and a key factor appears to be their dedication and will to move forward in their career. This view corresponds to what Akkermans and Tims (2017) argue, that the individual is highly responsible for achieving his career success and actively shape his career path. Overall, the view of a career seems to be characterised by optimism and a faith in their own possibilities to influence their career development. However, this view could also be questioned, since it may provide a too simplistic view focusing only on the individual. As our research aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of careers at IBM, we had to go beyond these statements and interpret their meaning. Throughout this process, a less idealised image occurred illustrating a more complex

reality. Still, the consultant seems to believe in their constructing of an idealized career and it may help them to make sense of their careers.

6.1.2 To plan or not to plan - that is the question

Career planning to some extent is perceived as supporting the consultants with their career advancement. It provides them with a view of what requirements may exist and acts as a tool for security and control, which is partly in line with DeSimone, Werner and Harris' (2002) arguments. By having specific goals written down, it may aid the individual to focus on career advancement during their everyday work. However, the concept of planning was seemingly abandoned by the majority due to the unpredictable nature of the future. Career opportunities are presented continuously, therefore to act accordingly as they emerge may be more suitable for the consultant's career advancement

6.1.3 The influencing dimensions - Out of one's control?

It has been highlighted that important dimensions when discussing career development and advancement at IBM are the state of *the market*, *organisational processes* and *networks*. *The market* acts as the fundamental provider for opportunities, since there seems to exist a need for an external demand when the consultants aim for career advancement. Furthermore, a business case is seemingly often required since organisational limitations determine how many consultants are able to advance. These together appear to conduct the prerequisites and create the opportunities for career advancement, thus the role of the individual is to be able to adapt and act accordingly.

The dimension of *organisational processes* includes both standardised processes that the consultants may have to handle in their everyday work, but also the processes for career promotion. To have the knowledge of how the processes function and how to speed up them up is perceived as important for the consultants. The knowledge can be obtained through *networks*, where managers and mentors play a significant role since they have already achieved some advancement and have learned one or two tricks. Still, it seems as if the emphasis is put on to have the "right" connections since time is limited and to know everyone is not possible. Furthermore, some *career lessons* appear to arise when the individual has spent some time within an organisation, for example, some things simply take time.

6.1.4 The processual career approach - a new career sensemaking view

Our research brought us to our theoretical contribution, *the processual career* approach which aims to illustrate the complex nature of a career in a KIF. It highlights the influencing career dimension and some guidelines of how to make sense of this, to be *thoughtfully flexible*. Our approach contributes with an understanding that the *individual* and *contextual* factors are *interconnected*, thus aims to fill the gap in current career literature that is seemingly insufficient in this aspect.

Our findings could be alternative to the more traditional way of thinking where career plans are part of the employee's career development as described by Rogers, Creed and Glendon (2008). We choose to take a rather critical stance towards the use of specific career plans, since our empirical material highlighted that the effectiveness of this approach could be questioned. Instead, we aim to contribute with an approach which we find may be more appropriate to the society we live in nowadays. As we live in a time characterised by fast changes, new demands and more boundaryless careers (Arthur et al. 2005; Baruch, 2004), the processual career view may enable for a more nuanced understanding of how KWs make sense of their careers. To plan for the future, especially for KWs working with ambiguous and complex knowledge (Alvesson, 2004), may be highly problematic. Instead one could aim for being more thoughtfully flexible, thus adopt the processual career approach.

6.2 Further research

Even though our research provides a theoretical contribution, due to the time limitations for our research, it has not been possible to explore other dimensions in depth that the consultants indicated could play an important part for a KW's career. For example, during our interview the role of HR in relation to the consultants' career came to light briefly a few times. The work/life balance also emerged hastily in some interviews and a culture aspect also appeared, since it is a global organisation where work with international colleagues is common. The combination of not having enough rich empirical or enough time to get a deeper understanding of what the implications of these factors have for the consultants' career advancement, consequently led us to focus on the more prominent aspects. Consequently, these are some dimensions that could be further explored for identifying how they might affect one's career. In other words, it may be beneficial to see if it is possible to expand the dimensions in the processual career approach.

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