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## **Gender aspects of the nomadic career: career trajectories in the ICT-sector**

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## Introduction

The observation that women are still under-represented in management in spite of a certain progress has generated a considerable body of literature, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon research world. A good deal of this research consists of the search for explanations for the meager female representation at the top of the business world. These explanations use various approaches. One series of theories can be summarized under the term "individual deficit model" (Hall-Taylor, 1997, Melamed, 1996, Oakley, 2000). Here, one starts from the premise that we have to look for the explanation for the under-representation in management functions among the characteristics of the women themselves. Women fall short in a number of areas in order to reach management positions: they do not have the right diplomas or experience; they lack management skills; they are not ambitious enough; they put their families first to the disadvantage of their careers, and so on. But also when women do have the right capital – the right diplomas, work experience, and management skills – they, on average, do not advance as far as do men (Stroh et al., 1992, Schmeer and Reitman, 1995). The second approach thus shifts the emphasis to conscious and unconscious discrimination. The question 'What's wrong with women?' was replaced by the question 'what's wrong with companies?' In order to answer this question, research into the organization culture has proven useful. Stereotypical conceptions about the characteristics of men and women are still no exception. They are part and parcel of many company cultures where they constitute a hidden but stubborn brake on the progress of women to the top of the business world (Parkin and Maddock, 1995, Rubin, 1997, Konrad and Cannings, 1997). The woman-unfriendly culture is translated into the structures and practices within the company. Women, for example, are excluded from the informal networks that men can use as the spring board for their next career move (Oakley, 2000, Reskin and McBrier, 2000). The common denominator of this research is the metaphor 'the glass ceiling', which refers to the stubborn, invisible barrier in the organizational hierarchy that women can hardly breach (Davies-Netzley, 1998). Literally, the glass ceiling implies that women can flow without problem through the company hierarchy but only up to a particular level. Above that level, the glass ceiling, are found few if any women. In many companies and organizations, it is not so much a matter of a glass ceiling but rather of a 'leaking pipeline': on each level of the organization work fewer women than on the level just below. The result of this dropping out is a very restricted presence in the highest regions. Gradually, the term 'glass ceiling' has come to be used for all kinds of restrictions in the flow-through of women even when a leaking pipeline might be a more appropriate image.

The research with these two approaches, however, generally envisages only a traditional career form, the assumption being that employees climb up the career ladder step by step (Mavin, 2000, 13). Ideally, the classic linear career takes place within one single organization or company in which the internal labor market marks out careers according to a pattern of successive functions established by the company. This linear model has long been a touchstone for career success (Mallon, 1999). However, today we can no longer describe many careers adequately with the image of the ladder. As a result of macro-economic changes, organizations are now functioning differently than the classic bureaucracies with their career ladders (Tolbert, 1996, p. ): rapid technological changes and globalization have their impact on the way a company should ideally work. The work organization is being increasingly characterized more by a less hierarchically organized structure with more autonomy and responsibility for each employee but also by ever greater

demands on the employee, who has to be able to work flexibly in an ever-changing organization (EU, 1998, 16-17). Lyness describes these trends in work organization as follows: *'well-defined internal career ladders appear to be breaking down due to downsizing, reduction in management layers, increased use of contingent workers, and the professionalization of management so that training and experience are less firm-specific'* (Lyness and Judiesch, 1999, 169). The changed work organization is bringing with it another career model in which employees can and must constantly give form to their own career (Baker and Aldrich, 1996, Walesh, 2001). Inversely, new career forms have an impact on the way in which organizations function. Several new concepts have been formulated that attempt to grasp the complexity of modern, flexible careers as a response to the changed organization of companies and the demands that employees have to satisfy. One of the pioneers of the non-linear career models is Douglas T. Hall. In 1976, he discussed the protean career (Mirvis and Hall, 1996, 241-242). Other concepts that were used are: the 'transitory' and 'spiral' career (Woodd, 2000b), the career-resilient workforce (Kouzman et al., 1999, 242) or the portfolio career (Templer and Cawsey, 1999). For myself, I will work with the concept of 'boundaryless career', which emphasizes the boundary crossings that employees make during their careers: boundaries between functional areas and between organizations (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996b). In a publication in 2000, Arthur and Peiperl gave the following definition of this career from: *'sequences of job opportunities that go beyond the boundaries of single employment settings'* (Peiperl et al., 2000, p. 5-6). The following of a career ladder within one single organization or company is replaced by an apparently goal-less pattern of career steps that extend over various organizations. However, the concept of a boundaryless career is misleading for, in the flexible career form that it describes, boundaries have not disappeared (Gunz et al., 2000). What it does concern is boundary crossings: the boundaries between organizations and between functional domains have become less rigid; crossing points have developed over boundaries that previously were well sealed. Therefore, I will use the concept of 'nomadic career' further in this paper, a concept that expresses the same thing. I have taken the concept from the French translation of the concept of 'boundaryless career' by Cadin, Bailly-Bender, and Saint-Ginie (2000).

In this paper, I will ask the question of what the nomadic career means for the moving up of women to management positions. Do the same mechanisms continue to play a role that hinder women from moving up to management functions on the classic career ladder? For it is clear that not everyone is capable of profiting from the opportunities that such a flexible labor market offers. A study in Silicon Valley, the Mecca of the American high-tech industry, illustrates this: *'Many employees in high-tech industries, especially those with the right skills and networks, are able to thrive in these volatile labor markets. However, many, if not most, employees in the region face real difficulties'* (Benner, 1998, 3). The highly educated who are able to keep their knowledge and skills up to date have the most chance of success in the flexible labor organization. Hirsch and Shanley warn against too much optimism about the flexible mobility opportunities in the new economy: *'Whether employees find the world of the boundaryless career to be beneficial or hostile depends on their particular resources, the extent of personal investments in those resources, and the degree to which their capabilities are valued by the firm in its new strategic situation'* (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996a, 222). In this paper, I will examine the question of whether gender could also play a role.

## Study

### *The ICT sector*

The data were compiled in 2002-2003 in the ICT sector. This sector was not chosen by chance. A number of characteristics of the ICT sector led me, from the outset of my research, to suppose that the nomadic career would there be easy to find. Research in Silicon Valley confirms this hypothesis for the American ICT sector (Carnoy et al., 1997). Indeed, the organizational changes that lead to flexible career formation are intensified in the ICT sector. The ICT sector is characterized by rapid technological changes that compel companies to organize themselves in such a way that they can respond flexibly to it: the companies have a flatter organizational structure with more teamwork in projects (Colcough and Michielsens, 2004). The projects in the ICT sector have a short life span of at most two or three years. The completion of a project is a typical moment for changing jobs (Gunz et al., 2000). Gunz, Evans, and Jalland, moreover, stress that the ICT sector is an open community: we see in the ICT sector a great deal of cross-pollination between companies. Companies work together in a network on different projects. In this way, employees get to know different companies, which facilitates transition from one company to another. Because of the rapidity with which technologies come and go, employees, finally, have to constantly retrain themselves: in the ICT, life-long learning is not an empty concept but an essential component of each job. A culture of life-long learning minimized the jump to a new job, to which a learning period is inevitably associated. Moreover, the ICT sector has long known a period of economic expansion whereby it was relatively easy to change jobs. The opportunities were there for the taking, as it were. At the beginning of 2001, the crisis set in and was aggravated by the events of 11 September.

### *Methodology*

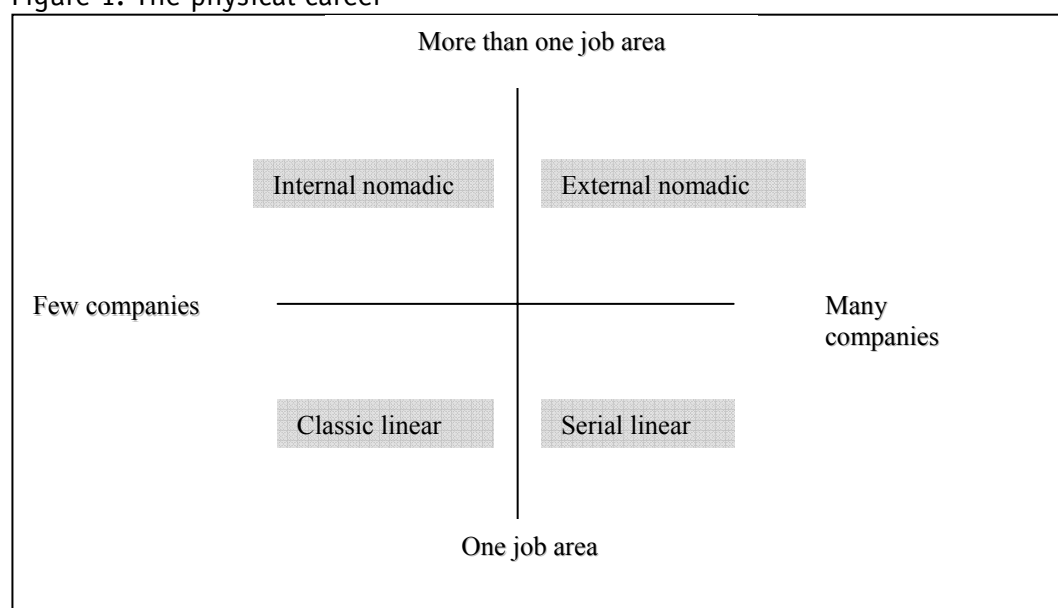
In order to investigate careers, the most appropriate method is a panel study in which respondents are followed for a longer period of time. Indeed, in this way one avoids memory distortions. However, the limited duration of this study did not permit it, so I opted for career reconstruction going back to the first work experience on the basis of in-depth interviews with a small number of men and women in the sector. For the selection of the respondents, I used two criteria: first, the respondents had to have been working for at least ten years so that the dynamic perspective could be applied to all of them; second, they had to have a leadership function. I also strived to involve respondents on various management levels in my study. I used a purpose-designed sample in function of the theories on changing career forms and in which I wanted to obtain as wide a variation as possible in the career forms (Maso and Smaling, 1998, p. 74). It was not my intention here to obtain a picture of the frequency distribution of the various career types but rather of the characteristics of the possible career forms in the ICT sector and their gender aspects. In total, 24 respondents were interviewed, 9 men and 14 women. The larger number of women can be justified by the greater diversity in careers among women than among men because of the greater role family responsibilities play for women. The range of possible decisions that they can make in this regard is, in practice, greater than men have. At the start of the interview round, I had not set a maximum or minimum number of respondents. I wanted to let the number depend on the additional information that each interview yielded as regards career type, motivation for transitions, the work/family combination, and so on.

### *The nomadic career in our sample*

Several authors point out that the notion of nomadic career, like the other concepts that are used to describe flexible careers, does not have a univocal definition (Mallon, 1999, 359, Nicholson, 1997).<sup>1</sup> In this study, I analyze the nomadic character of the careers of the respondents. I do this, first of all, on the basis of the physical career, and, second, on the basis of the subjective career. The physical career comprises the succession of jobs in someone's career, which is comparable to the *curriculum vitae*. The components of the physical career are the various career steps or transitions that succeed each other. In order to be able to evaluate the nomadic character of careers, I started with two formal characteristics of these career steps. In a nomadic career, boundaries are regularly crossed, while this is rather exceptional in the linear career. Two kinds of boundaries can be distinguished: the boundary between employers and the boundary between job areas. Second, it is not the case that each career step brings the employee a step higher on the hierarchical ladder while this is the case in the classic linear career. The combination of these characteristics yields the following career types:

- Classic linear: the classic career built up within the boundaries of a few companies.
- Internal nomadic: a career developed within a few companies but the career steps in each company are not limited to vertical steps. This career form also consists of horizontal steps or changes of job areas. For example, a systems engineer becomes a salesperson.
- Serial linear: with this pattern, one has a linear career with different companies in succession.
- External nomadic: this career type consists of a mix of different kinds of career steps, both internal and external steps, both horizontal and vertical steps. It also concerns careers that are characterized by at least one transition of job area.

Figure 1: The physical career



The nomadic content is the lowest in the classic linear career and the highest in the external nomadic career. However, my choice for studying the nomadic career in the context of the flow through to management functions has important consequences: in careers in

which the nomadic content is high, vertical career steps also occur, but not exclusively and they alternate with horizontal steps. Consequently, it would be more correct to speak of the nomadic variant of the management career. The end point of the career is here the same as with the linear career but the way to it varies, however. Other authors speak of a nomadic career only if the vertical steps are almost completely absent (Tremblay, 2003, 10) (Cadin et al., 2000).

In addition to a judgment on the basis of the formal characteristics of the career steps, I can also determine the nomadic character of the career on the basis of the subjective career. The subjective career consists of the reflection on the physical career: what meaning does the career and the various career steps have for the employee? I do this on the basis of the career orientation of the respondents and the reasons they give for all of the individual transitions. Here, we have to keep in mind that the respondents internalize the discourse of the company where they work. When the career policy of the organization contains elements of the discourse about the nomadic career, then it is normal that I would find an echo of them in the respondents. In addition, the social desirability presumably plays a large role in the response to the question of the reasons for the career steps: reporting career-oriented motives for career transitions can encounter resistance, certainly among women (Sools, 2002). Hence, in the first instance, I will consider the nomadic content in function of the formal characteristics and only in the second instance in function of the other characteristics. Following Derr (Derr, 1986), I will use the following typology<sup>ii</sup>:

- Getting ahead: the most important motive in someone's career is climbing the career ladder. Individual career steps are accompanied by an extrinsic, career-oriented motivation.
- Getting balanced: one searches for the optimum combination of work and private life.
- Getting free: one wants as much freedom as possible to determine the content of one's job.
- Getting high: the object is to have a challenging career.

As regards the nomadic content, we have here two extremes. On the one end of the continuum, we find respondents who give only career-oriented motives and whose career orientation consequently can be called "getting ahead": when they change a job or a function, they do it because they want to be promoted. At the other extreme, we find respondents with content motives and a "getting high" career orientation: they primarily search for challenges in their work and change jobs because they see an interesting opportunity in another company or in another department. Between these two extremes, we find careers with mixed motivations. The orientation here can be very diverse. However, it is not the case that the physical and the subjective careers always occupy the same position as regards the nomadic character. We find both respondents who, physically speaking, follow a linear career but whose career on the basis of subjective characteristics can be termed nomadic and respondents who follow an externally nomadic pattern but who are mainly driven by career-oriented motives.

## **Results**

*Do women have careers?*

Is the nomadic career a female career? Traditionally, the career models were based on male careers whereby the emphasis was on linear progress up the career ladder coupled with the acquisition of prestige and ever greater financial rewards (O'Leary, 1997, 92, Woodd, 2000a). Within the traditional career model, success is measured by the number of battles you've won to climb up the career ladder. When women compare themselves with this male standard, they often come out the poorer for it. We can thus ask ourselves together with Woodd (2000) the question: "*Do women have careers*"? A similar phenomenon is found with one of the respondents. She wondered a few times during the interview whether what she had to say was indeed interesting for my research into careers. Indeed, in her eyes, she did not have a real career because she never had an ultimate career objective related to certain positions and functional domains. She could not situate herself anywhere on a ladder with a clear beginning and end, but she changed ladders depending on the opportunities that arose. At present, she occupied a high position in a telecom company. Previously, she had exercised management functions in various computer companies.

The concept of nomadic career has the advantage, according to a number of authors, of fitting better the careers of women. It makes it possible to do research on careers without using the typical male career as the norm (Fortier, 2002). The concept of nomadic career, then, is a concept that removes the gender bias in career research because the male, linear career form is no longer taken as the norm with which careers are compared. One of my respondents can serve here as an example. For the first 10 years of her career, she exercised international functions with various companies, each time with more responsibilities. Since then, however, she stepped backward a few times: she once stopped working for a full year, and then went back into the ICT sector but then with a job on a lower level. Her responsibilities grew again until she switched to teaching. At present, she is back again working in the ICT sector. When we set her career against the linear measuring stick, then she comes off badly. However, we could look at it differently and state that she is having a typically nomadic career. She herself also looks at her career in this way.

Also according to Nanette Fondas, the nomadic career has many characteristics that belong traditionally to the female career: "*The restructuring of American industry in the past two decades has caused even previously successful men to experience such things as the devaluation of their work, the loss of secure employment arrangements, more part-time and temporary positions, more frequent career shifts in lateral or downward directions, increasing ambivalence about the role of work in their lives*" (Fondas, 1996 p. 286). Fondas describes the nomadic career here in negative terms, while I rather emphasized voluntariness in career steps in order to be able to speak of a nomadic career. On the basis of the interviews, indeed, I would say that both men and women have careers that deviate from the traditional linear career. In my research population, what are involved here are either voluntary transitions or transitions that are determined by family responsibilities or the career of the partner. The latter occurs only with female respondents; the voluntary transitions occur both with men and with women.

In addition to women's careers always having had already more characteristics of the nomadic career, Fondas sees another reason why women are better adapted to flexible career forms than men. The nomadic career requires, in her opinion, another, more female management style in which collaboration, empowerment, and the development of relationships of equality are central. This sounds nice in theory, but is it true in reality?



Fondas does not base her contentions on empirical research into the style managers use in organizations where nomadic careers are current. A Dutch study of organization culture teaches us to be careful here (Fischer et al., 2000). The researchers noted that even managers who themselves thought that they had many stereotypical “female” characteristics still, in their everyday leading, use a “male” management style. In practice, there are few differences between the leadership style of women and that of men. A male or female management style does not refer to real differences between men and women but rather to those characteristics that, according to the current stereotypes, are called male and female. Fondas’ argument for a female management style, moreover, contains a number of dangers (Oakley, 2000, 327-328). First, it places women on a pedestal from which they can easily fall off again if they cannot meet the stereotypical expectations. Just like the old, male management types, the second overlooks diversity among women. The promoting of “female characteristics” as essential for management remains stuck in the same stereotypical paradigm: one creates a new female stereotype. Hall-Taylor (1997) added a third danger to this essentialist view of women: women are made responsible for the humanization of the management team. In de interviews, the opinions of the respondents about their own management styles were not expressly sought, so I am not able to test this here.

### *Organizational characteristics*

Nomadic careers are not only the result of changing preferences of individual employees, they are also a response to changing organizational circumstances<sup>iii</sup> (Tremblay, 2003). Organizations can differ in very many respects from each other. In this section, I will first investigate whether or not the hierarchical structure of companies can have an impact on the career course of men and women. Second, I will look at the impact of the fragmenting of fixed career paths.

Companies that operate on a rapidly changing world market can succeed only if they have a flexible and dynamic structure. Kvande and Rasmussen (1995; 1999) distinguish between static and dynamic organizations. Static organizations are characterized by a pyramidal hierarchical structure, a strict separation between the different departments of the company, formal and vertical communication channels. In this kind of organization, the linear career is the ideal to be striven for. Dynamic network organizations adapt continually to rapidly changing markets. Networks arise when companies concentrate themselves on their core competencies and call upon other companies for all the other components needed in the production chain. A product or service comes into existence only with the collaboration of several companies in a network (Miles and Snow, 1996). These organizations primarily stress teamwork and attach less importance to hierarchical positions in the work organization. Project working is often accompanied by an organizational model where the lowest management levels are dismantled. Project leaders take over the tasks of the lower managers without the title (Evetts, 1997).

The organizations where the respondents worked correspond more or less to the image of the network organization with relatively few hierarchical levels. Magda described the result of this as follows:

*Magda: “But if there is someone, and that you do have in the ICT sector, who comes here and charts his career and within three years I want to be there, within*

*a year project leader, and so on – Indeed, there aren't so many steps here.” (§99, woman, top management, 57 years old)*

Sofie, too, commented on the limited number of vertical transitions that are possible in the company where she worked, a company with some 500 employees. To this she attaches the need for other kinds of transitions. Herself, she is one of the four country managers she is talking about in this citation:

*Sofie: “But that is also what I tell my people. If you want to build up a career, there are 1001 ways to make a horizontal career. You should not see it just vertically, because there is only one general manager and there are four business groups with four country managers at the head but that's all. There aren't five; there are only four. Thus, if you only aim for that, I mean, there are only four people. But if you actually go for the horizontal, for an expanding, an enrichment of what you do, if you keep an open mind, then there are many opportunities.” (§87, woman, top management, 41 years old)*

The research into the gender aspects of these organizational changes has not produced univocal conclusions. According to Lyness and Judiesch (1999), these trends have a negative impact on the flow through of women. The shrinkage of the management levels makes the competition for the remaining management jobs greater as Sofie's citation above makes clear. Women and men have more difficulties in realizing their ambitions. Because organizations are becoming flatter, the lower management disappears so it becomes more difficult to reach the first step on the management ladder (Crompton, 2002) (Grimshaw et al., 2002). More than do women, men look for promotion by applying to other companies. Women, in their turn, are promoted more than men in the same company and so encounter more hindrance from the disappearance of management levels. The promotional system and the organization culture, consequently, are not gender neutral. When internal promotions are replaced by external hiring for the filling of the higher management functions, the opportunities for women decline. According to these studies, the hindrances that play a role in the linear career continue to function and are even reinforced. Indeed, vertical career steps do not disappear in the nomadic career but become ever more difficult by organizational changes.

Perry, Davis, and Kulik (1994) see it less negatively. They start from the hypothesis that women would precisely do less well in companies with an internal promotion system in which only the bottom step is filled by external hiring. According to them, external career steps offer opportunities for women. Among the respondents, we do, indeed, see that external career steps can give an impulse to their careers. A number of times, they used external transitions explicitly to get around the lack of opportunities in the companies in which they worked up till then. This was done both by men and by women. The qualitative character of this portion of the study again does not permit a conclusion about the degree in which women and men differ in the number of times they take such steps.

Kvande and Rasmussen (1995) also look at it positively. According to them, women do indeed receive more chances in dynamic network organizations. They draw this conclusion on the basis of a case study in six Norwegian firms. The organizational structure, they contend, is one of the most important determinants for career success among women, because dynamic network organizations cannot afford to let female talent

be wasted: *“These companies had to be dynamic; they have profited from trying out new ideas and non-traditional approaches. This in turn created a corporate culture which welcomes change and new ways of doing things, including trying out women in non-traditional positions”* (Kvande and Rasmussen, 1995, 125). In this kind of organization, women can challenge the predominant company culture without being punished for it in their careers. Kvande calls these women *“the challengers”*: *“The challengers participate in the competition for the opportunities and rewards in the organization, but gradually on their own terms.... They are not only women after working hours as ‘wife and mother’, but also negotiate ‘difference’ actively and strategically when at work”* (Kvande, 1999, 312). But also in dynamic network organizations, stereotypical conceptions play a role on the level of working hours: only women who adapt to the *“traditional masculine work ethic”* (Kvande and Rasmussen, 1995, 126) can reach management positions. This traditional view of labor takes no account of a private life but assumes that all employees are 100% available. Even the *“challengers”* cannot escape this. One of the interviewed women, a single mother, succeeded in challenging this stereotype to a degree. At a certain time in her career, she was asked to become an assistant manager, a function that demanded a very great degree of availability for the company. She still meets the demand to work very much and long, but she does do this in part at home so she can combine her motherhood better with her job:

*Helen: At that time, we agreed: I want to do it, the job interested me enormously because you get to know all sides of the company. Thus, it’s very interesting, but then I agreed with him: OK, I have a practical problem. I can’t be here from 7 o’clock in the morning until 8 o’clock at night. I have a daughter who comes home from school and who has to be met. And I don’t want to say in a year: I haven’t seen my daughter for a year. So we actually worked out a kind of system, which later on turned out to work perfectly. All of my predecessors were indeed there from 7 o’clock in the morning, before the boss came in, until 8 o’clock at night after he had gone and then still in the evenings and on weekends” (§ 39, woman, top management, 37 years old).*

The second organizational characteristic that I will look at here is the internal career paths within companies. Traditionally, the career has been studied on the basis of the theory of the Internal Labor Market (Doeringer and Piore, 1971). Here, the assumption is that, with companies and organizations, rules apply that determined the mobility of employees. One important rule concerns the internal, hierarchical, labor paths that determine the route a person can follow and according to which time schema. In this way, it is not the individuals who have the most important decision-making power but the companies: Individual motives are subordinate to the logic of the organization. People change jobs because they follow the predetermined career trajectory and meet the conditions to make the next transition. In the literature on the nomadic career, however, it is pointed out that the importance of this Internal Labor Market has declined sharply. Conversely, one emphasizes the responsibility that each individual himself or herself has with respect to his or her career (Arnold, 1997). Employers no longer offer you a career, but you have to take your career in your own hands. Some authors even speak of compelled choices: not only can you choose yourself where you want to go, you also have to do it because there are no predetermined career paths (Geldof, 2001, p. 45). If you don’t take the initiative, you will stay marking time at one place. One of the respondents, at the time of the interview, a manager of a large international company, commented that, certainly for women, it was important to take the initiative oneself. She thought this was because there

was a greater discrepancy between what women want and what management thinks they want than between what men want and what management thinks they want.

*Erica: "If you, as a woman, don't make your ambitions known, and certainly as a wife and mother, then bosses, men, quite often have the tendency to decide for you. By this I mean, I have had that; yes, now she's got children, now she no longer wants a management job. You see? And if you, like I was when I was young, are continually working and not thinking enough on your own career, well then, you do want it, but you don't say it, then they decide it for you." (§143, woman, top management, 37 years old)*

#### *Growing importance of informal networks*

In the progress of a nomadic career, informal networks play an extremely important role. They offer two kinds of advantages. First, networks are necessary to be able to function properly in a job. A good network enables you to carry out each task in an optimum manner. One of the respondents, for example, spoke of contacts with competitors as a form of networking.

*Anne: "Thus, also within the company, it is very important that you people ... that you know what the people are occupied with. But I'm thinking, too, what are your competitors doing? Thus for this you – if you stay sitting at your desk you will never find out. Thus you have to go out. And it can be in all kinds of ways that you're networking" (§177, woman, middle management, 37 years old)*

In addition, a network provides advantages to the employee from a career perspective. This is much more important for developing a successful nomadic career than in the traditional career forms: *"networking as a career management strategy is important as the burden of responsibility for one's career has shifted from the organization to the individual, with the notion of employability becoming one's career goal"* (Forret and Dougherty, 2004, p. 420). The network provides information about career opportunities both within and outside the boundaries of the company where one is working at that time for both vertical and horizontal career steps. From the standpoint of the company, informal networks are used as channels for selection and promotion. Grimshaw points out that informal promotion procedures become ever more important when the classic career ladders in companies disappear: *"[We see] the simultaneous trend towards a reduced transparency in the internal career path and an increased use of individual staff appraisals. This increases the opportunity for individual managers to exercise discretion in the process of selection for career development"* (Grimshaw et al., 2002). From the interviews with the respondents, it appeared that networks were indeed very important in the career course both for the internal and external nomadic career and for the serial linear career. Beatrice is here a good example of this. She worked in several companies and she used her contacts to be able to make external transitions. In the following citation, she describes how she proceeded when she was told that she would be dropped when the company she was working for at that time merged with another:

*Beatrice: "It was the end of July when I was told that and then I went on vacation for three and, at the end of August, I began to pass the word around, naturally outside the company, among friends and acquaintances: boys, I'm*

*available again on the market, if you hear of something ...." (§35, woman, middle management, 44 years old)*

Beatrice's network is purely informal, consisting of contacts she had made during her successive jobs. However, such networks can also be more formal. Bart, for example, talked about an ICT fair, a typical networking event:

*Bart: "The entire ICT sector is also a quite limited world: Maybe you've heard of the TMAB fair? Now no longer, but, let's say 2 or 3 years ago, it was the biggest solicitation event in Belgium in the ICT sector. When I went there, I also knew a lot of people from other suppliers or from companies, clients, IT managers – with whom I'd come in contact with over the years. I knew a large number of people in the meantime, and then you walk around and it's 'Oh, Bart, how're you doing? Come on over to the stand and we'll have a beer. Say, you wouldn't want to come and work for us would you?' And then it begins. I would leave that fair with 4 of 5 offers." (§59, man, middle management, 36 years old)*

The research literature about women in management positions teaches us that women belong less often to networks that are useful for their careers than do men. Most of the female respondents thank their successful career in part to the network they built, but one of the women, a partner in a software house, talked about the lack of networks among women:

*Linda: "A woman actually devotes much less effort to networking. I mean ... a man, whatever might happen, thinks immediately, 'oh, yes, but I still know somebody there who could help in this case or I will ask that one' or whatever'. And also, when they are somewhere, they're constantly networking. Always in the back of their mind: that can come in handy sometime. A woman hardly does that at all. That is ... not only for me, but that is a generally known phenomenon. You about a lot about it." (§222, woman, top management 38 years old)*

Informal networks function as a gatekeeper, as a very efficient system that gives men opportunities and, *de facto*, excludes women, even though that is not explicitly the intention. From social psychology, we know that members of a group prefer members of their own group to outsiders. This does not at all need to be conscious in order to have bad effects: *"Although decision-makers may intend to be meritocratic, the effect of network-based recruitment is to increase sex-based ascription in the staffing of management positions"* (Reskin and McBrier, 2000). Various studies confirm the importance of informal networks for career success. From a large-scale study of middle managers in a large Canadian company, for example, it appeared that belonging to an informal network constituted the most important determinant for the difference in career progress between men and women (Cannings, 1991, p. 227-228). Men not only have more informal contacts with their superiors but they also benefit more from them than do women (Forret and Dougherty, 2004). Women, for their part, have to rely on formal procedures and performance to climb up the professional ladder. An American study of 516 randomly chosen companies came to the conclusion that companies that use informal channels for the recruitment of managers employed fewer female managers than companies that used formal procedures (Reskin and McBrier, 2000, 226-228).

### *Lifelong learning*

In addition to a good informal network, lifelong learning is crucial for the development of a nomadic career. Continual skill acquisition belongs to the core of a nomadic career. The importance of lifelong learning has different possible gender effects. First, women obtain less access to training than do men. Moreover, they have less access to informal training from mentors. Obtaining extra training, finally, is the responsibility of the employee and must, in part, take place on his or her own time: *“If people use their own time to develop and maintain vocational knowledge, the increased-time burden represents a further encroachment of work into formerly personal time”* (Baker and Aldrich, 1996, 142).

That lifelong learning is crucial in the ICT sector is beyond discussion for the respondents. They reported three models with which companies and employees can deal with lifelong learning. In the first model, the company enables the employees to take all kinds of courses, both in working time and outside it. In large companies, this is certainly the dominant model. In the second model, the company provides little or no formal training, but on-the-job learning is central. In companies, where project work predominates, this model is frequent. In the third model, the company does not provide formal training but on-the-job learning is insufficient to keep up with the latest technological developments so the employee’s own efforts and initiative become very important.

*Model 1 Caroline: “Within [our company] there have always been very many educational opportunities. That is thus one of the positive points of this company, let us say... at that time, you still had 20 days of education per year, which is one month. Now that is somewhat less because with e-learning and so, these needs have shifted somewhat. But in that way, you thus in fact expanded your knowledge domain and, naturally, also apply it in projects.” (§34, woman, middle management, 39 years old)*

*Model 2 Kristien: “Actually, you have to be continually getting further training. But you can do that in two ways: you can take courses, but in our company it is more the principle of learning while doing. Thus, actually, we continually have new projects for other clients. Actually, you always have to start from zero, which is actually the challenge we always have.” (§131) Erica: “Yes, the IT sector has grown very rapidly and whether the people had to be trained or not, there was so much work and you just had to do your job. You learned on-the-job because there was no time for training courses” (§95, woman, top management, 37 years old)*

*Model 3 Rose: “When you’re in those large companies, then you learn that on-the-job. Then you simply see to it that you have enough literature that you then read at home in your free time. If something new comes out, then you say: now I’m going to stay a couple evenings longer and I will only do that and so you learn. Because you have there an enormous amount of exchanging, this change will come, it actually offers itself. You simply undergo it. It is not that you have to exert much effort for it. You do have to exert some effort, but I don’t think more than anywhere else. Here, and certainly when I was teaching, then you know nothing more. Then you very soon stand still. Here, I really have to work at it to keep up. How can I keep up? By seeing that you actually keep sufficient*

*notebooks, subscriptions, that you subscribe to enough magazines. See to it that the offer that you receive, that you get enough, and try to go to as many seminars as possible .... Generally they take place on the weekends, but still try to attend.” (§147, woman, lower management, 42 years old)*

The occurrence of this last model is not separate from the rise of new organizational forms in the ICT sector. According to Grimshaw and colleagues, it reduces the chance for on-the-job training for a management position because management levels disappear in flatter organizations (Grimshaw et al., 2002). In contrast to the rhetoric about lifelong learning, these researchers found that the importance of training courses declines in flat organizations while at the same time the chance for on-the-job training also disappears.

The chance that the training has to be done in one's own free time increases from model one through model two and is the highest in model three. Apart from the training model that companies use, a career with many external transitions also requires a greater investment in training because each new job involves a learning period. This increases the chance that this has to happen outside of working time. Family responsibilities make it more difficult to have time free for training. For Bart, on-the-job training was not sufficient to keep up with the technological developments:

*Bart: “And if you've done a couple years of management, they you don't have time any more to be busy with technology. Reading in the evenings, but you know, I've got two small children running around and very different things happen here in the evenings or on the weekends.” (§63, man, middle management, 36 years old)*

To the extent that the traditional division of labor puts family responsibilities more in the hands of women than of men, this can mean an important handicap on the careers of women. The rapid changes in the ICT world reinforce this. Longer absences can be problematic. Beatrice, for example, used her pregnancy leave to study for her new job:

*Beatrice: “... I had to prepare, I knew nothing about PCs, about the company. So I went and bought American magazines in this period, and I began to send my baby son already two days to the crèche because he had to go full time later.” (§23, woman, middle management, 44 years old)*

According to Rosemary Crompton, the emphasis on the transferability of competences can also constitute an opportunity for women. She thinks that this would mean that career breaks have less of a negative impact on the career course than in a career where the organization-specific competences are important because transferable competences in principle become obsolete less rapidly than organization-specific competences (Crompton, 2002). Transferable competences can be more easily kept up-to-date without being present in the company, for example, during a career interruption. The example of Beatrice, indeed, shows that knowledge can be acquired in one's own time, in her case during her pregnancy leave. However, there is another side to the coin if this time investment is not possible. The rapid changes in the ICT sector often require that an effort has to be made to update one's knowledge again even after a short interruption of a few months, such as, for example, a pregnancy leave.

*Greater individual freedom of choice versus time-greedy careers*

In the nomadic career, some authors see the possibility of finding a better balance during the working career between work and private life by alternating periods of much work with periods of less work. *“More-flexible career options, in turn, give people the freedom to change their career orientations over their lifetime”* (Mirvis and Hall, 1996, 246). Others qualify the individual freedom of choice of the working people, also when the careers no longer follow the standard hierarchical path: *“... in many cases career planning is done mainly by the organization, and the individual has very little effect on it”* (Baruch, 1996). According to Rosemary Crompton, career breaks should, in theory, have fewer negative consequences on someone’s career course because working people are less dependent on organization-specific knowledge (Crompton, 2002). In practice, however, this advantage is nullified because nomadic careers require a large time investment. Fletcher and Bailyn, for example, stress that the boundary between private life and work has been hermetically sealed off also in the nomadic career model: *“... the worker implicit in the boundaryless form of organization continues to be one whose ability, willingness and energy to focus on work, and to develop new marketable skills, are unconstrained.”* (Fletcher and Bailyn, 1996, 257). Bailyn and Fletcher call this the paradox of the nomadic career: on the one hand, workers are themselves responsible for their career and thus have to be enabled to find a balance between work and private life but, on the other hand, employers expect that workers put aside their private lives to the advantage of their career. Successful nomadic careers require a great time investment: *“... in the absence of a transparent career path, managers increasingly rely on individual discretion in the appraisal process and expect low level staff to demonstrate their commitment through working longer hours or working for a temporary period in posts with greater responsibility”* (Grimshaw et al., 2002). This makes it difficult to find a good balance between work and private life. Candace Jones observed this in the film industry: *“The second challenge at this stage of one’s career is to maintain some sense of balance between personal and professional life. The constant demands of performing quality work, seeking new projects, and maintaining a personal network of relations can consume the energies and lives of project-network participants”* (Jones, 1996) Employers demand total dedication from their personnel. Arnold cites a senior manager: *“Companies are looking for highly committed, totally flexible and completely disposable employees”* (Arnold, 1997, 33). The flexibilization of the European labor market has perhaps not proceeded to the same extent but the trends are present, certainly in the ICT sector. Many respondents from the ICT sector work long days –12-hour working days are not exceptional. The striving for a balance between private life and work emerges as one of the advantages of the nomadic career, but the other characteristics move this to the background. Helen observed, for example, that working less has career implications:

*Helen: “I think that you have to be realistic here. Now, if I say tomorrow that I want to work less, that will be ok. I don’t say that it wouldn’t be ok, but you will be given less responsibility, that’s logical, and you will notice this in your evaluation pattern”* (§77, woman, top management, 37 years old).

Dirk explicitly rejects that people (women) both take care of their families and strive for a career.

*Dirk: “That’s an important fact, these choices that you have to make. Ultimately, I have a lot of respect for those people who can make these choices. And what are the choices, for example? That is the balance between your personal life and your*



*professional life. Where do you put the boundary? ... It is much more interesting to know that somebody says, "OK, I will go so far and don't expect anything further." ... This has certain implications for your career possibilities, too. It is very easy to with such people. ... Those who are the worst are those who want to have something of everything; those who want to have an extensive personal life or personal advantages and, on the other side, also broad career opportunities without having to put too much time into it." (§111, man, middle management, 43 years old)*

However, in a number of companies, the working hours can be filled in so flexibly that the combination between a busy job and a family is indeed feasible. It is also possible to have the career fluctuate and work less temporarily because of the combination of work/family. The career of Rose is an example. She said herself that, at one point, she put her career in the refrigerator. However, she has already experienced in the past that, after a step back or an interruption, one could not simply take up one's old career again. As regards pay and responsibility, it is difficult to go back at the same level as before the interruption.

*Rose: "I am over the fact that I stopped there and then started out again. Then I took a serious step backwards (as regards pay). I did catch up again after one year. Then I was back on the same level. At the time, when my husband went to Paris, yes, then I threw everything overboard, and I am still far from where I sat then. I am still not yet where I was at the time when I went back to work after I stopped the first time. Thus, financially, I suffered seriously. That is the choice you make. That I am not happy with it, that's another story ... (laughs). That is also one of the reasons why I say I want to devote myself fully to it. I want to recover what I lost, that is a fact. But that was a conscious choice." (§179, woman, lower management, 42 years old)*

## **Conclusion**

The nomadic career differs in many respects from the classic linear career but the analysis above produces a diffuse picture of the gender aspects of the nomadic career. Opportunities and dangers loom. The image of the nomadic career certainly fits better with the reality of the careers of women. Mostly men were successful in the classic linear career. The great advantage of the concept of nomadic career is that the implicit male norm for looking at careers has disappeared without a new female norm having come in its place. On the contrary, there is room for diversity. But this does not automatically mean that women will be more successful than previously when organizational changes bring along a more nomadic career world. It is not clear whether flexible network organizations, which nomadic careers bring along, are positive for women or not. The research results in this regard produce contradictory noises. The nomadic career contains the promise of more individual freedom in giving form to a person's career. This individual freedom can be used to seek a better balance between private life and working life. The nomadic career, however, is a time-consuming career that qualifies the individual freedom of choice. Instead, it encourages rather than discourages the rat race. Informal networks, finally, gain in importance. Since women are less part of networks that are useful for one's career, this works to the disadvantage of women.

In this paper, I look at the nomadic career in the context of management careers. This means that, in my analysis, upward mobility remains important, even though it happens no longer via prepared career paths. In the jungle of career possibilities, people need not only ladders but also good vines to be able to jump from one department to another or from one employer to the next. These vines are good informal networks, flexibility, both for content as well for working conditions and a positive attitude toward lifelong learning. Vines, however, offer little to hang on to, and it remains an open question whether the handholds of men are as slippery as the handholds of women. Many classic mechanisms that hinder women from climbing up the traditional career ladder remain active in the building of a nomadic career. In the jungle, too, there are still glass ceilings, even though vines can help one, via a detour, via another company, to get around them.

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<sup>i</sup> On the basis of the analysis of the career of the respondents, I arrived at a division into four types. At the beginning of the study, however, I used the following two-part division:

- A linear career is a career that consists primarily of vertical career steps within one company. The career orientation is focused on the acquisition of more pay, status, or promotions, and the individual career steps are tuned to this.
- A nomadic career is a career that consists of both vertical and horizontal and both internal and external career steps. The career orientation is not oriented to the acquisition of more pay, status, or promotions. The individual career steps occur voluntarily and are based on intrinsic and extrinsic motives.

<sup>ii</sup> Derr's typology contains a fifth career orientation, namely "getting secure": the search is first of all for job security. However, this did not occur among the respondents I interviewed.

<sup>iii</sup> Here, we encounter the classic structure-versus-actor debate: Is it the environment that establishes the contours within which individuals have merely a small margin for movement or is it, on the contrary, the individual who determines himself or herself where his or her career ends up? I opt for a model whereby both the actor and the structure play a role. Derr calls this the "external career reality": the combination of opportunities and restrictions that the company offers (Derr, 1986, p. 23). The individual motives and the structuring force of the company are not independent of each other. The motivation to strive for a transition is not independent of the possibilities that the company (or, more broadly, the labor market) offers as well as from the opportunities that someone makes for himself or herself to be able to achieve these objectives both internally in the company where one works and externally in other companies (Van Aerscht, 2004, p. 52).