Paper presented at the First ISA Forum of Sociology
Barcelona, Spain
September 5 - 8, 2008

Nomadic careers in the Flemish IT-sector: fact or fiction?

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Abstract

Because of macro-economic changes, organizations are now functioning differently than the classic bureaucracies with their career ladders: rapid technological changes and globalization have their impact on the way a company should ideally work. The work organization is being increasingly characterized 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. As a result careers are changing. 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 meet. One of the pioneers of the non-linear career models is Douglas T. Hall. In 1976, he discussed the 'protean' career. Other concepts that were used are: the 'transitory' and 'spiral' career, the 'career-resilient' workforce or the 'portfolio' career. Another concept is that of the 'boundaryless career' first used by Arthur and Rousseau, which emphasizes the boundary crossings that employees make during their careers: boundaries between functional areas and between organizations. 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. The boundaries between organizations and between functional domains have become less rigid; crossroads have developed across boundaries that previously were well sealed. Therefore, we will use the concept of 'nomadic career' as a synonym for the boundaryless career.

This paper focuses on the empirical validation of the concept of the 'nomadic career'. The paper answers the following research questions: (1) to what extent does the nomadic career exist in the Flemish IT-sector and (2) what are the determinants of the nomadic career? Special attention is given to the gender-aspects of the nomadic career. To analyse the nomadic career, the research is situated in the Flemish IT-sector. The organizational changes that lead to flexible career formation are intensified in the IT sector. This sector was not chosen by chance. Moreover, we were looking for a setting to study nomadic career trajectories. A number of characteristics of the IT sector have led us, from the outset of the project, to suppose that the nomadic career would be easy to find. Research in Silicon Valley confirms this hypothesis for the American IT sector. Indeed, the organizational changes that lead to nomadic careers are intensified in the IT sector. The IT sector is characterized by rapid technological changes that force companies to organize themselves in such a way that they can respond flexibly to them: the companies have a flatter organizational structure with more teamwork in projects. The projects in the IT 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, Evans, and Jalland, moreover, stress that the IT sector is an open community: we see in the IT 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 facilitate 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 IT, life-long learning is not an empty concept but an essential component of each job.

The data were compiled in 2002-2003 in the Flemish IT sector. We used both qualitative biographical career interviews and a quantitative retrospective survey.

1 Introduction

This paper reflects a research project on careers in the Flemish information, communication and technology sector (the IT sector). The aim of this paper is to explore the nature of career development in this highly dynamic sector. The traditional ideas about careers start from people gradually climbing the career ladder of one single organization: *"career is traditionally defined as an ordered sequence of development, extending over a period of years and introducing progressively more responsible roles within an occupation"* (Mavin, 2000, p. 13). This linear career model has long been a touchstone for career success (Mallon, 1999). However, this career model has become a subject for criticism. Today we can no longer adequately describe many careers with the image of the ladder. In response to macro-economic changes, organizations are now functioning differently from the classic bureaucracies with their career ladders: rapid technological changes and global market pressures have their impact on the way a company should ideally work (Tolbert, 1996). The work organization is increasingly characterized by less hierarchy and 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 & Judiesch, 1999, 169). The changed work organization produces another career model in which employees can and must constantly give form to their own career (Baker & Aldrich, 1996; Walesh, 2001). The traditional linear career has been replaced by an increasing heterogeneity and different career trajectories.

1.1 NEW CAREER CONCEPTS

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 meet. One of the pioneers of the non-linear career models is Douglas T. Hall. In 1976, he discussed the 'protean' career (Mirvis & Hall, 1996, 241-242). Other concepts that were used are: the 'transitory' and 'spiral' career (Woodd, 2000b), the 'career-resilient' workforce (Kouzmin, Korac-Kakabadse, & Korac-Kakabadse, 1999, 242) or the 'portfolio' career (Templer & Cawsey, 1999). Another concept is that of the 'boundaryless career', which emphasizes the boundary crossings that employees make during their careers: boundaries between functional areas and between organizations (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996a). 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, Evans, & Jalland, 2000). The boundaries between organizations and between functional domains have become less rigid; crossroads have developed across boundaries that previously were well sealed. Therefore, we will use the concept of 'nomadic career' further in this article as a synonym for the boundaryless career. We have taken the concept from the French translation of the concept of 'boundaryless career' by Cadin, Bailly-Bender, and Saint-Giniez (2000).

1.2 THE ORIGINS OF THE NOMADIC CAREER

The development of nomadic career trajectories is closely connected with social trends on a macro, meso and micro level. Tremblay remarks that the ideas about changes in career trajectories have been preceded by ideas about changes in the organization of companies: first there was the nomadic company as a result of macro economic changes and only then there was the nomadic career (Tremblay, 2003). In his influential book, Rise of the Network Society, Manuel Castells describes three crucial features of the new economic order that emerged in the eighties and nineties: (1) the capacity to generate, process and apply information is crucial for the competitiveness of firms, (2) the new economy operates on a global level and (3) business networks are the leading organizational form (Castells, 2000 (second edition), p.77). Rapid technological changes and globalization have an impact on the structure of companies. In a dynamic and unpredictable environment companies have to be able to react swiftly to changes. They need what Mintzberg calls an organic structure (Lammers, Mijs, & Van Noort, 2000, p. 493) or what Castells calls a network organization. Dynamic network organizations adapt continually to rapidly changing markets. Networks arise when companies concentrate 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 & Snow, 1996). These organizations emphasize the importance of teamwork instead of the 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). Even traditional bureaucratic companies have to change their organizational structure in a dynamic environment. Actually, this means that these organizations work with temporary project teams and task groups that consist of members of different divisions and hierarchical levels of the organization. Günter Schmid attributes the development of flexible careers not only to these macro economic trends and their consequences for the organization of firms. He also points to the individualization of society. Individuals are more and more guided by their own individual life plans and not only by societal institutions like the church, the state or the family (Schmid, 1998). Everyone writes his or her own biography (Beck, 1992, p. 135). Or more specifically: everyone constructs his or her career.

The aim of this paper is to explore the career development of workers in the Flemish IT sector. We limit ourselves to the following two research questions:

- To what extent does the nomadic career exist in the Flemish IT-sector?
- What are the determinants of the nomadic career?

2 Study

2.1 THE IT-SECTOR

The data were compiled in 2002-2003 in the Flemish IT-sector. This sector was not chosen by chance. The research in the Flemish IT sector, in terms of career development, is minimal, while at the time of our study it was frequently discussed in the media: people working in the sector were labelled as job-hoppers. Moreover, we were looking for a setting to study nomadic career trajectories. A number of characteristics of the IT sector have led us, from the outset of the project, to suppose that the nomadic career would be easy to find. Research in Silicon Valley confirms this hypothesis for the American IT sector (Carnoy, Castells, & Benner, 1997). Indeed, the organizational changes that lead to nomadic careers are intensified in the IT sector. The IT sector is

characterized by rapid technological changes that force companies to organize themselves in such a way that they can respond flexibly to them: the companies have a flatter organizational structure with more teamwork in projects (Colcough & Michielsens, 2004). The projects in the IT 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 IT sector is an open community: we see in the IT 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 facilitate 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 IT, life-long learning is not an empty concept but an essential component of each job.

2.2 RESEARCH 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 and budget of this study did not permit it. We opted for a qualitative approach on the one hand with a career reconstruction going back to the first work experience. On the other hand, we organised a career survey in a sample of IT companies to see to what extent the nomadic career is present. To assess the nomadic character of the career of the respondents we used some key indicators, identified during the analysis of the qualitative interviews.

2.2.1 Career interviews

We opted for a 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, two criteria were used: 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. We also strived to involve respondents on various management levels in my study. We used a purpose-designed sample in function of the theories on changing career forms and in which we wanted to obtain as wide a variation as possible in the career forms (Maso & Smaling, 1998, p. 74). It was not our 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 IT sector. In total, 24 respondents were interviewed, 9 men and 15 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, a maximum or minimum number of respondents were not set. We 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.

2.2.2 Career survey

For the quantitative career survey, we used a two-stage sampling technique. In a first stage, a sample of Flemish IT-companies was approached to participate in the research project. In a second stage, all the employees of the companies who were willing to participate received an electronic questionnaire. Initially, we planned to approach only a sample of the employees of participating companies. But we had to give up this plan,

mainly for two reasons. On the one hand, the results from the first stage were disappointing: only a small proportion of companies were prepared to distribute the survey. On the other hand, a sample would have been an even bigger barrier for the companies to cooperate because it increases the effort that had to be made by them. As a result, we lost control over the number of employees that received the survey and the way the survey was announced in the company. In most companies, all the employees received an appeal to fill in the survey via email. In two companies, only one department was involved. In two other companies, the appeal was not distributed via mail, but via an internal newsletter.

All potential respondents were approached twice. The total response is 16,5%. In companies who distributed the appeal via email the response varies between 12,4% and 66,7%. In the two companies who used their internal newsletter, the response was much lower, namely 5,4% and 4,7%. When we do not include these two companies, the response increases to 34,9%

Table 1 gives an overview of some key variables. In terms of gender, almost two thirds of the respondents were men. Compared to official labour force statistics, this means an overrepresentation of female respondents[1]. Like in many other European countries, the IT-sector is traditionally a male dominated sector in Flanders. More then half of the respondents work on an executive level; 43% of the respondents have a staff or a managerial function. The educational level of the respondents is high: only 17,8% of them do not have a degree of higher education. Half of the respondents hold a technical degree: they studied engineering, computer sciences, mathematics… More then half of the respondents work in an IT-function[2]. According to company size, we have an under representation of employees who work in small organizations[3].

Table 1: Characteristics of the survey respondents

gender	men	364 (63,1%)
	women	213 (36,9%)
hierarchical level	higher management	24 (4,2%)
	staff function	41 (7,2%)
	middle management	85 (14,9%)
	lower management	95 (16,6%)
	executive	326 (57,1%)
educational level	no higher education	100 (17,8%)
	professional higher education	305 (54,3%)
	university	157 (27,9%)
technical degree	yes	276 (50,4%)
	no	272 (49,6%)
current job IT function	yes	329 (57,3%)
	no	245 (42,7%)
company size	less then 100 employees	131 (22,7%)
	100-499 employees	264 (45,6%)
	500 or more employees	182 (31,5%)

In theory, a two-stage sample must be analysed by multilevel techniques (hierarchical linear model) (Snijders & Bosker, 1999). For the purpose of this paper, we only present the results from regression techniques, mainly for two reasons. Firstly, when we use

[1] According to the official statistics of the social security office only 25,6% of the employees in the IT-sector were women (2001).

[2] We defined an IT-job as any function aimed at the design, development, planning, consultancy, execution or maintenance of information and communication technologies.

[3] Belgium and Flanders have an economy of SME's. According tot the official statistics of the social security office, 39% of the employees in the IT-sector work in companies with less then 100 employees (2001).

multilevel techniques, the effects of the second level (the company) are very small[4]. Secondly, we do not use company characteristics as variables in the regression models.

3 Results

3.1 CAREER TYPES IN THE BIOGRAPHICAL INTERVIEWS

Several authors point out that the notion of the nomadic career, like the other concepts that are used to describe flexible careers, does not have a univocal definition (Mallon, 1999; Nicholson, 1997). In this study, we analyze the nomadic character of the careers of the respondents in a twofold way: first of all on the basis of the physical career, and secondly on the basis of the subjective career (Bagilhole, 2002). 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, we 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 (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996b). 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.

The nomadic content is the lowest in the classic linear career and the highest in the external nomadic career. However, our choice for respondents on a management level has important consequences[5]: 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, Bailly-Bender, & de Saint-Giniez, 2000).

In addition to a judgment on the basis of the formal characteristics of the career steps, one 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? We

[4] When we use a multilevel regression, the intraclass correlation coefficient in the empty model equals 0,057: only 5,7% of the variance in the nomadic character of the physical career can be attributed to the group level (the company). This is a non-significant effect.

[5] We selected managers because this paper is based on a project about the influence of the nomadic career on career progress and the glass ceiling in the IT sector.

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, we 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), we use the following typology[6]:

- 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: workers search 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. We can call these nomadic motives (Sullivan, Carden, & Martin, 1998). Between these two extremes, we find careers with mixed motivations. The orientation here can be very diverse.

It is important to remark that the physical and the subjective careers do not always occupy the same position as regards to 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 a nomadic pattern but who are mainly driven by career-oriented motives. As the table shows, the nomadic character of the careers of the respondents is rather high, both from a physical as from a subjective perspective. This confirms the assumption that the ICT-sector is a good sector to study nomadic careers: all the respondents have a nomadic career to a certain extent.

Table 2: Number of respondents in each career type

	subjective career	
physical career	linear motives	nomadic motives
classic linear	/	6
serial linear	/	5
internal nomadic	2	2
external nomadic	/	9

[6] 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 that were interviewed.

3.2 CONSTRUCTION OF THE NOMADIC CAREER VARIABLE FOR THE SURVEY

The results of the analysis of the career interviews have some consequences for the construction of the nomadic career variable in the survey. First, we decided to work with a continuous variable to reflect the nomadic character of someone's career. Secondly, we only use the physical component of the career. Thirdly, we used four variables to construct the physical career of the respondents:

- the number of companies (external steps),
- the number of changes of functional domain[7],
- the number of horizontal career steps,
- the number of refusals of vertical career steps.

Table 3 gives the key numbers for these four indicators. The average respondent worked for 2,86 companies during his or her career and changed 0,29 times his or her functional domain. The maximum number of companies is twelve; the maximum amount of changes of functional domain is four. Half of the respondents never changed functions horizontally, namely without a promotion in terms of rewards or responsibility. A small minority of respondents, slightly more then 10%, already refused one or more vertical promotions.

Table 3: Indicators of the nomadic character of the physical career (frequency distribution or average score)

		missing
number of companies	min/max = 1/12 average = 2,86 standard deviation = 1,997	5
number of changes of functional domain	min/max = 0/4 average = 0,29 standard deviation = 0,648	24
horizontal career steps (%) never once several times	 50,6 24,7 24,7	2
refusal of vertical career steps (%) never once several times	 87,3 10,5 1,7	3

A combination of these four variables gives the new variable "nomadic character of the physical career". Table 4 contains the features of this new variable. The minimum score is 1. This means that the respondent has been working in the same company and the same functional domain since the beginning of his or her career, has never refused a promotion and has never made a horizontal career step. As soon as the respondent has done one of these things, the score rises. The average score is 4,11. As figure 1 shows, the variable does not follow a normal distribution: there is a skewness to the right[8].

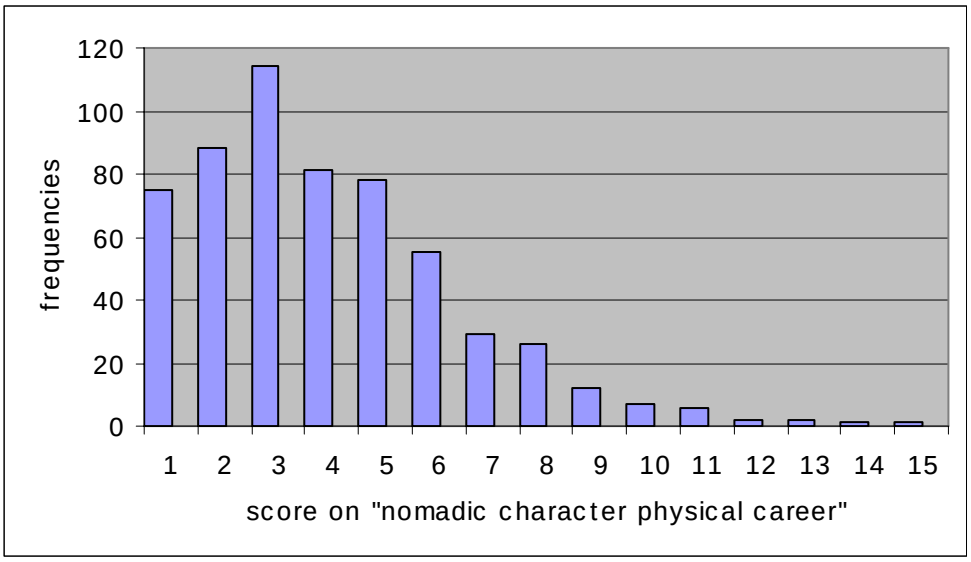
[7] In the questionnaire we made a distinction between three functional domains: commercial, IT and administrative. The respondents were asked if they ever made a transition between any of these domains.

[8] The Shapiro-Wilk test on the assumption of normality confirms the picture of figure x: de test statistic is .913 with p=.000. We cannot assume a normal distribution.

Table 4: Nomadic character of the physical career

N	Valid	577
	Missing[9]	0
Mean		4,12
Std. Deviation		2,47
Variance		6,09
Minimum		1,00
Maximum		16,00

Figure 1: Frequency distribution nomadic character physical career



3.3 BIVARIATE ANALYSIS OF THE NOMADIC CHARACTER OF THE CAREER OF THE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Who has a high score on the nomadic character of their career and who scores low? More generally: what variables have an influence on the nomadic character of the physical career? Table 5 contains some personal background variables and characteristics of the career of the respondents on the one hand and one company variable on the other hand. This company variable however, the hierarchical structure of the company, was not measured at the company level, but based on the perception of the respondent. There is no correlation with the nomadic character of the career.

The first thing we can notice is the lack of a difference between men and women: the average nomadic character of men is slightly higher then that of women, but this difference is not statistically significant. Respondents with children living at home have a higher average score then respondents without children living at home. The educational level also plays a role: respondents without a degree from higher education and respondents with a professional degree score higher on the nomadic character of their career then respondents with a university degree. The content of the education (technical or not) does not have an influence.

An important part of the variables we wanted to include are several career attitudes. In total we have fifteen attitudinal items in our questionnaire on which we performed a

[9] Missings were replaced by sample averages.

factor analysis. This resulted in a solution with five factors (see appendix). Only one of these attitudinal factors is positively correlated with the nomadic character of the career, namely factor 2. This factor expresses an external and extrinsic ambition. Respondents who score high on this factor want to change jobs often and find their compensations important. The other attitudes are not correlated with the nomadic character of the physical career. This corresponds to the conclusion of the qualitative interviews whereby we could see that the interviewees who had a classical linear or a serial linear career also scored high on the nomadic character of their subjective career.

Respondents who already worked in an IT-job have a higher average score on the nomadic character of their career, then respondents who never worked in an IT-job. Moreover, the passion for technology is also positively correlated with the nomadic character of the physical career. This confirms the popular idea of the highly sollicited IT-worker who often changes companies.

We asked the respondents to typify their own career. They could choose between one of the following career paths: managerial career, technical career, project career, commercial career or mixed career. The average score on the nomadic character of the career differs according to these types. Respondent who classify their career as mixed have the highest average score, while respondents who classify their career as a project oriented career have the lowest score. This contradicts our assumption that project work facilitates external career transitions (Gunz et al., 2000).

Respondents who feel that they were unjustly not granted a promotion, that they missed opportunities and that they have different ideas about their own career then their manager have a higher score on the nomadic character then respondents who did not have these experiences. This could possibly mean that these negative career experiences push the respondents into more nomadic career steps by taking their career in their own hands. Part of the nomadic character of the career seems to be forced: respondents who unwillingly changed functions have a higher score then the respondents who did not.

Table 5: Bivariate analysis of the nomadic character of the physical career[10]

	mean or correlation	N Missing
gender (mean)		3
men	4,20	
women	3,97	
career seniority (pearson correlation)**	0,457	8
Children living at home (mean)**		8
yes	4,68	
no	3,52	
educational level (mean)**		15
no higher education	5,00	
professional higher education	3,82	
university	4,01	
Technical degree (mean)		29
yes	4,06	
no	4,03	
experience in IT-function (mean)**		2
yes	4,26	
no	3,63	
passion for IT (pearson correlation)**	0,122	16
Unjustly not granted a promotion (mean)**		9
yes	4,75	
no	3,96	
Unwillingly changed function (mean)**		9
yes	5,55	
no	3,81	
Different ideas about career (mean)**		8
yes	4,68	
no	3,81	
Missed opportunities (mean)**		9
yes	4,63	
no	3,90	
Factor 1 “confident, intrinsic ambition” (pearson correlation)	-0,007	19
Factor 2 “external, extrinsic ambition” (pearson correlation)**	0,140	15
Factor 3 “employer responsibility” (pearson correlation)	-0,051	18
Factor 4 “having fun” (pearson correlation)	-0,036	13
Factor 5 “family centered” (pearson correlation)	-0,002	11
Hierarchical structure of the company (mean)		2
more hierarchical levels than an average company	4,64	
less hierarchical levels than an average company	3,92	
as much hierarchical levels as an average company	4,09	
no idea	3,83	
Career path (own judgment) (mean)**		39
managerial career	3,98	
technical career	4,13	
project career	3,55	
commercial career	4,30	
mixed career	4,68	

**p<0,01 *p<0,05

3.4 DETERMINANTS OF THE NOMADIC CHARACTER OF THE CAREER OF THE RESPONDENTS

The bi-variate analysis in table 5 gives us an overview of the correlation between several independent variables or determinants on the one hand and the dependent variable “nomadic character of the physical career” on the other hand. We looked at the

[10] For categorical variables the table contains the mean, for numerical variables the table gives the Pearson correlation coefficient.

correlation for each of the independent variables separately. In this section, we will test the influence of all the different determinants simultaneously with a linear regression analysis. We start with some hypotheses based on the literature on nomadic careers and the results from the qualitative interviews.

Hypothesis 1: nomadic careers are more frequent with low-skilled respondents then with high-skilled respondents. We expect a negative correlation between the educational level and the nomadic character of the physical career. According to this hypothesis, nomadic careers are a consequence of the secondary labour market for low skilled people. Only when this hypothesis is not confirmed and there is no negative effect or a positive effect of the educational level, we can conclude that the concept of nomadic careers is something more then a new word for the old concept "secondary labour market". The concept of the nomadic career is indeed being used to describe the changes in the upper regions of the labour market (Grzeda, 1999). On the secondary labour market, the classical linear career has always been less prevalent due to the precarious character of much jobs for lower skilled workers (Tolbert, 1996).

Hypothesis 2: the nomadic character of someone's career is correlated with their "IT-level". Respondents with a technical degree (H2a), who have experience in an IT-function (H2b), and with a passion for technology (H2c), have a higher score on the nomadic character of their career then respondents without these characteristics. Nomadic careers are more frequent with IT-professionals then with respondents in managerial and administrative jobs. Nomadic careers express the existence of a professional labour market within the IT-sector: they are more common within a specific professional group.

Hypothesis 3: negative career experiences augment the nomadic character of the physical career. Career transitions can be used to overcome these negative experiences. We expect respondents who already experienced that they were unjustly not granted a promotion (H3a), who had different ideas about their career then their manager (H3b) and who have the feeling that they missed opportunities (H3c), to have a higher score on the nomadic character of their career then respondents who did not have these negative experiences.

Hypothesis 4: the nomadic character of someone's career is not only a result of voluntary career moves; part of it is also a result of career choices made by the company and not by the individual employee. To assess this involuntary part of the nomadic career, we look at the magnitude of the influence of the variable "unwillingly changed function", compared to the other determinants in the model. In the literature on the nomadic career it is pointed out that the importance of the internal labour market with its predefined career trajectories 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. Others question 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).This hypothesis tests the role of the company in the nomadic character of the physical career.

Hypothesis 5: family responsibilities rise the nomadic character of the career. Respondents with children are more nomadic then respondents without children. 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 & Hall, 1996, 246).

Hypothesis 6: the nomadic character of the physical career does not differ for men and women. 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"*? The concept of nomadic career has the advantage 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). However, this conceptual advantage does not mean that the nomadic career trajectories themselves are more common among women then men. It is for example a time-consuming career type which encourages rather than discourages the rat race (Fletcher & Bailyn, 1996) (Grimshaw, Beynon, Rubery, & Ward, 2002). This brings women to a disadvantage (Rutherford, 2001). Given these contradictory gender aspects, we start from the hypothesis that there is no difference between women and men regarding the nomadic character of the physical career.

From the start of this research project, we expected that career attitudes would be an important predictor of the nomadic character of the physical career. But from the qualitative interviews, we already know that the career attitudes do not always have the expected relation with the physical aspect of the career. Therefore, the attitudinal variables we constructed on the basis of a factor analysis are used as predictors in the regression analysis, but without specific hypotheses.

Table 5 contains five regression models. In each model, we added more variables. Model 1, the basic model, has only two variables: gender and career seniority. We look at the effect of gender, without controlling for the other determinants. Career seniority is an important control variable in all the models because the respondents differ in age and therefore in career tenure. The results show that being male or female does not have an impact on the nomadic character of the physical career. Career seniority plays an important role: for each year, the nomadic character increases with 0,136. In model 1, R^2 equals 0,208: 20% of the variance in the nomadic character of the physical career can be predicted by a combination of gender and career seniority.

In model 2, we added the educational level. With this model we can verify whether or not the nomadic career is an expression of the existence of a secondary labour market segment within the IT-sector. When there is a negative correlation between the educational level and the nomadic character of the career, it means that the nomadic character of the career of lowly educated respondents is higher then that of highly educated respondents (cf. hypothesis 1). R^2 rises only marginally. We can find an indication for the existence of a negative relation between the educational level and the nomadic character, but this relation is not statistically very sound. Respondents without a degree from higher education score slightly higher on the nomadic character of their career then respondents with a university degree, but this effect is not very convincing: it is only statistically significant on a level of 0,1 ($p=0,084$). There is no difference between respondents with a university degree on the one hand and respondents with a professional bachelor on the other hand.

Model three contains some extra variables that measure the "IT-level" of the respondents. A positive relation between the IT-variables and the nomadic character of the physical career points to the existence of a professional labour market within the IT-sector. It would mean that especially IT-professionals have a nomadic career (cf. hypothesis 2). Contrary to our hypothesis, we can see that respondents without a technical degree, have a higher score on the nomadic character of their physical career then respondents with a technical degree. Due to the scarcity of technically qualified personnel, we expected the opposite. Companies seem to succeed in reducing the turnover over employees with a technical degree. On the other hand, the passion for IT is positively correlated with the nomadic character of the physical career. Moreover, the

respondents who ever held an IT-position, score higher on the nomadic character of their physical career then the respondents who never worked in an IT-function. These last two findings, confirm the picture of the IT-worker as highly mobile. Depending on which indicator we use to assess the IT-level of someone, we must accept or reject hypothesis 2. We can not give a univocal answer to the question whether or not the nomadic career is an expression of the existence of a professional labour market within the IT-sector. If this professional labour market exists, it is not based on educational degree like most classical professional labour markets, but based on professional experience and the attitude towards technology.

In model 4 we test whether or not the nomadic character of the physical career is influenced by some career features on the one hand (cf. hypothesis 3 and 4) and the family situation on the other (cf. hypothesis 5). For the career features, the respondents evaluated their career on some aspects. Did the following situations already occurred during their career: unjustly not granted a promotion, having different ideas about their career then their manager, having the feeling that they missed opportunities and unwillingly changed functions? A positive relation with the nomadic character of the physical career means that part of the nomadic character is caused by involuntary and/or negative career experiences. Two of these situations have a statistically significant impact on the nomadic character of the physical career: (1) unwillingly changing functions and (2) having different ideas about your career then your manager. This means on the one hand that for some respondent the nomadic character of their career is not due to voluntary career decisions. The second situation could also mean that some respondents take their career in their own hands when the organizational career paths are not desired. Model 4 also shows that respondents without children living at home score lower on the nomadic character of the physical career then respondents who do have children living at home. This confirms our hypothesis that the nomadic career is partly family-oriented.

Lastly, model 5 comprises the career attitudes. In the literature on the nomadic career, these are often mentioned as defining elements of the nomadic career. Our own analysis of both the physical and the subjective career types in the IT-sector however, revealed that there is no obvious connection between both aspects of the career. In model 5, we test the possible influence of the career attitudes on the physical career. The regression analysis shows that only one attitudinal factor has a sound statistically significant effect. First of all, there is a negative regression coefficient for factor 3. This factor expresses to what extent the respondents think it the responsibility of the employer to provide an interesting career. The higher the score on this factor, the lower the score on the nomadic character of the physical career. Respondents who think they are themselves responsible for their career, score higher on the nomadic character then respondents who depend for their career on their employer. Factor 2, an external and extrinsic ambition, has a positive effect. But, this effect is only significant at level 0,1 ($p=0,055$). The other attitudinal variables do not have a significant effect.

When we compare the different models, we can conclude that the adding of extra variables has little effect on the strength and significance of variables that were included in earlier models. Furthermore, we want to point to the crucial role of career seniority. The effect of seniority decreases slightly when we add more variables, but it stays the variable with the biggest predicting power in all of the models. When we compare the R^2 of model 1 with the other models, we can notice that the largest increase in model 4 when we add the career features. The most elaborate model can predict 30% of the variance of the nomadic character of the physical career.

Table 6: Regression models nomadic character physical career

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	B	**Beta**	**B**	**Beta**	**B**	**Beta**	**B**	**Beta**	**B**	**Beta**
constante	2,377		2,381		,588		4,766		5,547	
gender (male/female)	,058	,012	,095	,019	,272	,054	,318	,063	,305	,061
career seniority	,136	,457**	,132	,446**	,136	,459**	,111	,376**	,107	,363**
educational level (reference= university)										
no higher education			,518	,079°	,526	,080°	,553	,084°	,596	,090*
professional higher education			-,175	-,036	-,015	-,003	-,052	-,011	-,031	-,006
IT variables										
technical degree (yes/no)					,741	,154**	,710	,147**	,683	,142**
passion for IT					,084	,131**	,091	,141**	,091	,142**
experience in IT-function (yes/no)					-,512	-,092*	-,519	-,093*	-,557	-,099*
family situation										
children living at home (yes/no)							-,526	-,109*	-,622	-,129**
characteristics physical career										
unjustly not granted a promotion (yes/no)							-,123	-,021	-,213	-,036
unwillingly changed function (yes/no)							-1,263	-,195**	-1,264	-,195**
different ideas about career (yes/no)							-,434	-,089*	-,425	-,088*
missed opportunities (yes/no)							,010	,047	,072	,014
career attitudes										
factor 1: internal ambition									-,008	-,012
factor 2: external ambition									,075	,076°
factor 3: employer responsibility									-,122	-,093*
factor 4: having fun									,072	,029
factor 5: family centered									-,050	-,022
R^2	,208		,218		,247		,315		,328	
adjusted R^2	,205		,212		,237		,299		,305	
std. error of the estimate	2,146		2,136		2,103		2,020		2,011	

**p<0,01 *p<0,05 °p<0,1

4 Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to shed some light on the career development of men and women in the IT-sector. We introduced the concept of the nomadic career, a career trajectory with frequent vertical and horizontal transitions. Since we assume that the traditional linear career – whereby employees climb up the career ladder of one single organization step by step and are primarily extrinsically motivated – is no longer the dominant career model.

In the literature, the nomadic career concept has been attributed several characteristics, but we can not find one univocal definition (Mallon, 1999; Nicholson, 1997). Most authors stress the different nature of the physical career steps compared to the classical linear career: career transitions are not only vertical, but also horizontal (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996); not only internal, but also external (Peiperl, Arthur, Goffee, & Morris, 2000) and finally not limited to one functional domain. In the nomadic career the diversity in career transitions is much larger then in the classical linear career. This makes the nomadic career less predictable. On top of these physical characteristics we can find several other features of the nomadic career that are stressed by different authors in varying degrees: the motivation for career transitions is more intrinsic then extrinsic (Sullivan et al., 1998); the company is not responsible for the career of it's employees, instead the responsibility for one's career lies in hand of each individual (Arnold, 1997); competencies are not firm specific, but can be used across different settings (Saxenian, 1999).

Although the research body is growing, we can still say that the empirical research about this type of career is rather scarce. In this paper, we looked at the prevalence of this career type and it's determinants in the Flemish ICT-sector. We used two methodological approaches: qualitative career interviews on the one hand and a career survey on the other hand. The qualitative interviews gave an insight in the type of career trajectories that are common in the IT-sector and in the relation between the physical and more subjective characteristics of someone's career. For the physical career, we made an analysis of the different career transitions and decided to distinguish between four career types: classic linear, internal nomadic, serial linear and external nomadic. The nomadic content is the lowest in the classic linear career and the highest in the external nomadic career. For the subjective career, we looked at the career orientation (Derr, 1986). We can conclude that nomadic types of career orientation are dominant in our small sample of managers. However, this does not mean that the nomadic character of all physical careers was high. The physical and the subjective careers do not always occupy the same position as regards to 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 a nomadic pattern but who are mainly driven by career-oriented motives.

For the career survey we analysed the determinants of the nomadic character of the physical career. The level of education has an impact, but not like we expected: respondents without a degree score higher on the nomadic character of their career then respondents with a higher level of education, albeit with a low degree of statistical significance. This means that we do not have clear support for the assumption that the nomadic career is a new career concept that can adequately describe the career trends in the upper regions of the labour market: the educational level still has a negative correlation with the nomadic character of the physical career.

Popular belief asserts that IT-workers are job hoppers. The survey provides us with a more subtle picture. When we only take the field of education into account, we can

certainly not find a professional labour market for IT-workers: the nomadic character of the physical career is higher for respondents without a technical degree then for respondents with a technical degree. Nonetheless, a passion for IT and having experience in an IT-function are positively correlated with the nomadic character of the physical career. It seems that the nomadic workers in the IT-sector are those that are trained on the job because of the shortage of skilled IT-personnel.

One kind of negative career experiences increases the nomadic character of the physical career, namely conflicts between the respondents and their manager about their career development. The respondents seem to take their career into their own hands only at a time of conflict. We can add to this, that part of the nomadic character of the career is caused by involuntary career transitions. This contradicts some of the early literature on the nomadic career were the voluntary character of flexible career types is stressed (Arnold, 1997).

The career attitudes play only a small part in the nomadic character of the physical career. And finally, the analysis shows that gender plays no direct role in the nomadic character of someone's career.

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Appendix: Factor analysis career attitudes

An important part of the predictors we wanted to include in the model are several career attitudes. In total we have fifteen attitudinal items in our questionnaire on which we performed a factor analysis. This resulted in a solution with five factors. The next table 11 shows the results of the factor analysis. Only factor scores higher then .3 or smaller then -.3 are shown. The factor scores of items which are included in the factor are bold.

1. Factor 1 contains six items: “finding it important to get a promotion soon (two years)”, “finding it important to be ambitious”, “looking for challenges”, “finding that your competencies can be used with other employers”, “having a clear view of one’s future career” and “thinking to be able to find an interesting job after job loss”. Ambition and intrinsic challenges are intertwined. Respondents who score high on this factor are confident about the future, they are ambitious and want a challenging job.

2. Factor 2 contains four items: “finding a pay rise necessary with each career transition”, “finding it important to change employers regularly”, “finding that you become rigid when you stay too long in one job” and “thinking that to much mobility is bad for your career”. These respondents have an external and extrinsic ambition. Respondents who score high on this factor want to change jobs often and find their compensations important.

3. Factor 3 consists of three items: “finding that companies have to provide an interesting career“, “thinking that individuals do not have much power to influence their career“ and “thinking it a bad moment to change jobs”. Respondents who score high, put the responsibility for the career in the hands of their employer and they combine this with a low willingness to change jobs.

4. Factor 4 contains only one variable: “finding it first of all important to have fun”.

5. Factor 5 also contains only one variable: “being prepared to slow down your career for your family”

Table 7: factor scores career attitudes (principal component analyses)

	factor 1	factor 2	factor 3	factor 4	factor 5
finding it important to get a promotion soon (two years)	**,592**			-,361	
finding it important to be ambitious	**,822**				
finding a pay rise necessary with each career transition		**,540**			,342
being prepared to slow down your career for your family				,503	**,519**
looking for challenges	**,774**				
finding it first of all important to have fun			,322	**,645**	
finding that companies have to provide an interesting career	,351		**,404**		
thinking that individuals do not have much power to influence their career		,372	**,540**		
finding that your competencies can be used with other employers	**,460**		-,336		,346
thinking it a bad moment to change jobs			**,477**		
having a clear view of one’s future career	**,509**			,358	

thinking to be able to find an interesting job after job loss	**,440**		-,351		,439
finding it important to change employers regularly		**,663**			
finding that you become rigid when you stay too long in one job	,347	**,516**			
thinking that to much mobility is bad for your career		**-,399**	,388		,366