Enabling "Career Ambidexterity" as a New Learning Paradigm in Management Classrooms for the Innovation Economy

The innovation and digital transformation economy have created challenges and opportunities in career development. Among those challenges include how individuals can better exploit core competencies while allowing for innovation, defined as "ambidexterity" in strategy research. In this session, we extend this definition and build from Jackson et al.'s (2017) career ambidexterity paper with a design thinking approach from Burnett and Davis's (2016) work. Specifically, we outline in two exercises where students can 1) identify why ambidexterity is of strategic importance to today's organizations, and 2) how to target pockets or opportunities in their resumes and career paths around this problem.

Keywords: Career ambidexterity, design thinking in careers, and HR Strategy

Introduction

Today's economy has created a wealth of opportunities and challenges for individuals and organizations. Among those challenges include increased emphasis on less linear career paths that are challenged in part by a newer ecosystem system economy driven by digital transformation and innovation. For example, it is projected that by 2030 the majority of current skills will be outdated and that 85% of the skills needed have not been invented yet (Wainright, 2019). As Wainright (2019) and Deloitte Insights (2019) explain, both organizations and individuals will need to critically re-evaluate current with future skill sets in order tackle the speed and velocity of this newer economy – for example where can they build greater efficiencies while also tapping newer value creation?

Added to these trends are three critical issues. Specifically, how can individuals prepare and reposition their higher education learnings that can move beyond just fitting skills into traditional organizations, as they are being potentially questioned, repositioned, and disrupted, toward a career that demonstrates resourcefulness, innovation and initiative? Second, where and how can individuals understand how business and careers are being challenged to set appropriate benchmarks and anchors in this regard? Third, and interrelatedly, how can individuals define their own career narrative that can allow them greater agency? Especially given the levels of disruption and newer forms of organizing found in an ecosystem economy that are tied to digital transformation and innovation, there is a need for management educators to take initiative on this topic and to help students become even more aware of the gaps between education and its relevance to this newer economy.

Yet critical issues remain. For example, in traditional management classrooms, specifically those around organizational behavior, HR and strategy, understanding what

competencies and what levels of innovation are needed are often inferred from practical cases, consulting projects, or flipped classrooms. These approaches may infer the everyday realities needed to understand what is necessary for career development. While these approaches have benefits for the students, we suggest that more explicit ties and on-going evaluation with career connectivity is critical. As part of the approach for this year's conference theme on innovation and collaboration, this proposal centers this issue on ambidexterity-development (exploitation of core competencies with innovation), which stems from strategy research in the design of organizations and in talent.

The concept of "ambidexterity", emerges from a 40-year trajectory, introduced by Duncan (1976), and popularized by March (1991) as the exploitation of core competencies with the need to explore for innovation. Ambidexterity is of rising importance to the dynamics of this newer economy given the need to test for quality with understanding as well as to develop avenues for experimentation which are increasingly being popularized in general media such as Forbes and Deloitte Insights. Although the academic literature has historically been studied at organizational-levels of analysis, it is within the past five years that it has been given increased attention to more of its micro-foundations of ambidexterity including HR practice and career development. This includes where and how individuals can develop what core competencies drive business while also providing avenues to take risk and engage in disruptive innovative practices.

Theoretical Frameworks and Traditions

While there have been a number of different books written on how to address the need to become more agile and identify key traits and abilities in career management, there is a need to

understand how to align ambidexterity interest to achieve competitive alignment that organizations may face.

This is not just a question of looking at how to create more flexible career patterns such as those often identified with the concept of protean careers or how identification of personality and decision-making qualities can better align to specific job descriptions or placement. Rather, it also embeds how individuals can leverage aspects of career to reinforce or disrupt existing business models and practices.

For example, at Yahoo! one of this organization's key emphases is how individual talent in this newer innovation and digital transformation economy can be defined around the concept of "Star Powers". The concept of "Star Powers" begins with the idea that individuals may not always be the right fit for a specific role, but holistically may have a set of competencies with levels of innovation that a company needs. Rather than hiring for a specific job or building a career around functional areas that have been historically the industry standard, the idea, similar to job crafting, is to think more holistically around designing or tailoring projects that can both align and tap these skills and areas for career development on an ongoing basis.

While the Yahoo! example may be helpful, there lacks a holistic framework on how to audit, align, and experiment with these issues in the classroom for this level of career transferability. What do we mean by core competencies or innovations? How might they be bounded or not by what we learn in the classroom such as in OB, strategy, and HR? What alternative understandings need to emerge? And how might they align or not to organizational versus self-interests?

To address this issue, this proposal builds from Burnett and Evans (2016) work on design thinking as applied to life and careers toward the concept of "career ambidexterity" that is defined in Jackson, Lescent-Giles, and Dunn-Jensen (2017) work as to how individuals and HR can build careers and specific measures around exploitation of their core competencies along with metrics that can tap for innovation. As noted in Jackson et al.'s work (2017), ambidexterity at this level of analysis, is specific to its more micro-foundations in career development practices, need to both audit individual competencies and levels of resourcefulness while also showing how they are aligned or misaligned to a company's business model. Taking a step further, this proposal shows through this auditing process, using a design thinking approach to this topic, we identify where both management educators and their students may identify multiple critical gaps and also opportunities in their understanding of this problem, and most importantly, what other critical actions are needed and which affect career management.

Learning Objectives

With the above in mind, the learning outcomes associated with our presentation activity include:

1. Understanding the relationship between ambidexterity and its micro-foundation in career development practice as relevant to management classrooms and career development

2. Identifying key competencies that are linked to the course learning objectives

3. Identifying the competencies from the student's resume

4. Comparing and surfacing the gaps that might exist between the key competencies from the course learnings and the student's resume and from this gap analysis, develop an action plan and a career risk portfolio based on design thinking approach

As preparation points, we suggest that those who are less familiar with career ambidexterity approach and design thinking as applied to careers review the following article and book.

- https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15416518.2017.1353900

- designingyour.life/the-book/

Session Description and Plan

To achieve our learning objectives, our session is thus planned as follows:

- Format **– Our format is an activity/exercise.** As part of our format we provide a general overview of career ambidexterity approach from Jackson et al. (2017) and how it fits into design thinking around careers and the newer economy. We then segue-way into two exercises that audit and leverage design thinking concepts around this problem to as career development steps for students.

- Target Audience – Undergraduate and/or graduate students and educators particularly those in organizational behavior, human resources, and strategic management classrooms who are interested in seeing how to tie their learnings to career applications in this newer economy.

- Materials Needed – computer and projector

- Time Requested – 60 minutes

We will divide the requested 60 minute of general discussion and inquiry exercise into three parts (i.e., Parts A, B, and C):

Exercise/Activity Overview

- **Part A: A Review of "Ambidexterity", Why Is It Important for Today's Digital Transformation Economy and Career** (10 minutes)

    o This part of the session will include a brief discussion and review of what ambidexterity is and why it is central to talent identification and career development.

    o The focal point of Part A is to provide enough background into this concept, then followed by how it can be identified in careers and as linked to management. We provide sample cases here from both our classroom experience and outside work and applications on this topic.

- **Part B: Auditing your resume, cv and classroom learnings for ambidexterity** (40 minutes divided into two 20-minute activities/exercises)

    o **Building from Part A, we introduce two exercises.**

    o **Exercise 1 (20 minutes) –** In this part of the session, participants will have an opportunity to participate in the classroom exercise. First, we will present the assignment guidelines. The participants will then identify and classify course learnings as core competencies and/or innovations based on a course syllabus. Next, the participants will review how this is reflected or not on a mocked-up student resume. Finally, the participants will analyze how the resume might be aligned or not to existing core competencies linked to the course learnings.

    Exercise 2 (20 minutes) - From this first exercise, we then segue-way into a second exercise where we will have the participants in small groups, brainstorm

and come up with at least two prototypes as to what it means to have an

ambidextrous career in today's economy; this exercise builds form design

thinking but applied to careers. Then, in small groups, the participants will discuss

how might this help students and harvest next steps in their career

development?

- **Part C: Debrief and Wrap-Up** (10 Minutes)
    - An interactive debriefing of the exercise will conclude the session. As part of our

        wrap-up, we will have participants identify 2 key learnings and alternative areas

        for consideration. We will also briefly discuss our own lessons learned as

        instructors, and pitfalls to avoid when conducting the activity will be highlighted.

    - Note: Session participants will be welcome to ask questions, share suggestions,

        and brainstorm about how to integrate the assignment into their own classes.

        Collaboration and interactive discussion will be encouraged throughout the

        session.

Application to Conference Theme and Unique Contribution to MOBTS

The concept of ambidextrous organizations has been long attributed to higher

performance – especially those functioning in competitive markets (See O'Reilly & Tushman,

2013; 2016 - for an extensive review and examples). At the same time, there lacks better

articulation as to how educators and students can understand and leverage ambidexterity to

harvest key skills learned and needed in today's economy for individual career development. For

example, much of how we as educators look at key learnings in the classroom may lean either

too heavily on exploiting core learnings, or how to be more creative. The concept of

ambidexterity, vital in today's innovation and digital transformation economy, is not just about

striking a balance between the two, but knowing where, how and when to identify what exploitation and exploration skills means in this newer economy. Specifically, we want students to understand where are the gaps, and how can students identify and develop ambidextrous skills through what they have learned in management classrooms not just to align, but also disrupt their own career trajectories.

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This is the first time this proposal has been presented to MOBTC and at a conference.

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