Low-Qualified Labors' Job Mobility, Boundary Crossing, and Career Success: A Cross-Industry HRM Perspective

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This cross-industry study explored human resource professionals' experiences with low-qualified labors' job mobility within and across organizations. Ten organizations from various industries were represented including manufacturing, higher education, medical, retail, warehouse and transportation, and information technology. Findings suggest major influencers' impacts on job mobility were distinctly different across industries and dependent on organizations' job composition by educational attainment. Findings extend current literature delineating negative outcomes from low-qualified labor employing misinformed protean and boundaryless behaviors and suggest a unique phenomenon may exist for low-qualified labor related to job mobility, job mobility plateaus, and boundary crossing. Suggestions for future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, the job market became increasingly segmented, causing a polarization between low-wage jobs (described as the secondary job market) and high-wage jobs (described as the primary job market) (Drayse, 2004). Drayse explained our emerging talent pipeline problem, stating that during this century high-skilled high-technology jobs and unskilled low-wage service jobs grew, while middle-income low-skilled jobs bridging the two job markets disappeared. This created a gap between the high-skilled primary and low-skilled secondary job markets. Employers' demand for labor grew at the top and bottom of the labor market. Ridzi (2009) suggested change in the low-skilled secondary labor market was indicative of the growing demand by employers for low-wage unskilled labor—the growing of job opportunities at the bottom of the job market. This growth suggests individuals' career paths in the secondary job market may be constrained by lack of training and education, facilitating mainly lateral movements within the low-skilled secondary job market offering lower wages, less secure employment, fewer opportunities for advancement, and membership in the ranks of the working poor (Ridzi, 2009).

Job Mobility

There are two traditional career paths typically utilized to bridge from the secondary job market into the primary job market. The first well-documented successful career path is attaining a 4-, 6-, or 8-year post-secondary degree. Completion of higher education certifications and degrees are transferable from one employer to another and facilitate career paths with hierarchical job mobility within the larger job market through developing competence, also called *contest-based job mobility* (De Vos, De Hauw, & Van der Heijden, 2011; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics

(BLS) (2015), the attainment of a post-secondary degree at these levels results in increased employability, job mobility, and economic gains. However, BLS data also indicated that attainment of some college, a 2-year degree, certificate, or certification is likely to result in increased employability, but is less certain to result in increased job mobility or sustained economic gains. This uncertainty is a notable issue and important to this current study.

The second traditional career path is successive job mobility through long-term employment with one employer, termed *sponsor-based job mobility*, utilizing intra-organization career tracks, employer sponsored on-the-job training, and supervisor affordances for access to skill development opportunities (Becker, 1993; De Vos et al., 2011; Ng et al., 2005). Completion of employer-based education and training is generally less transferable from one employer to another in the broader job market, reducing the potential for "boundary crossing" (Rodrigues, Guest, & Budjanovcanin, 2016, p. 670). However, while employer-based education and training may facilitate intra-organizational career paths, recent research indicates internal hierarchical job mobility has declined (Rodrigues et al., 2016).

Recent career trajectories have evolved into multidirectional job mobility, including lateral or downward within the employer's internal job market. The shift toward multidirectional job mobility—also known as alternative career paths, within as well as across organizational boundaries—may be attributed to downsizing, restructuring, increased levels of change, and slow organizational growth (Reitman & Schneer, 2008). The discussion of multidirectional job mobility within and across organizational boundaries is informed by concepts of employability (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008).

Employability has been widely researched and linked to intra-organization and cross-organization job mobility in the changing career landscape (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; Heijde & Van Der Heijden, 2006). Concepts of employability support contest-based and sponsor-based job mobility through the perception of attributes. *Attribute-based job mobility* describes behaviors that signal higher levels of employability, including individuals being adaptable, proactive (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008), engaging in forward thinking career preparation, seeking opportunities (Ashford & Taylor, 1990), being mobile, and self-directed in their careers (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008). Contest-based mobility through developing competence, sponsor-based mobility through employer talent development programs, and attribute-based mobility through perceptions of employability all describe frameworks individuals use to move from one job to another. The changing landscape of job mobility from predominately sponsor-based mobility to contest-based and attribute-based mobility has created a shift toward individuals enacting protean and boundaryless attitudes and behaviors.

Career Attitudes and Perspectives

The protean career concept describes an individual's career attitudes and behaviors as being self-directed, adaptable, autonomous, emerging from frequent changes, and having values-driven motivators (Briscoe, Hall, & DeMuth, 2006; Gunz & Peiperl, 2007). To some extent the protean attitude is one where individuals conceptualize their own version of what is career success and manage their own development toward their career goals. The boundaryless career attitude is a boundaryless mindset described as psychological willingness to cross organizational boundaries, and it may also be described as job mobility or a physical willingness or preference for organizational mobility (Briscoe, Henagan, Burton, & Murphy, 2012). The boundaryless mindset is often described as a willingness to reach out and work with others across departments within their organization, as well as across organizations though network building (Rodrigues et al., 2016). Therefore, both protean and boundaryless career attitudes are synergistic, supporting contest-based, sponsor-based, and attribute-based job mobility toward career success (Briscoe et al., 2012).

In the past, career success was viewed from the perspective of sponsor-based hierarchical job mobility—moving upward within the organization. However, the flattening of organizational structures has created a hierarchical plateau in many organizations, which has led to increased boundary crossing by employees (Drucker-Godard, Fouque, Gollety, & Le Flanchec, 2014). While the hierarchical plateau is objective and measurable within an organization's career track, it becomes subjective in the larger job market when utilizing boundary crossing for job mobility. Also noted as a subjective plateau, a job

content plateau is the lack of challenge experienced by individuals from having mastered job skills and job content (Lentz & Allen, 2009). Concepts of challenging work, fulfillment, and job satisfaction lead to differing psychological perceptions of job plateaus, job mobility, and career success within the boundaryless attitude (Inkson, Gunz, Ganesh, & Roper, 2012; Smith-Ruig, 2009). Given this changing nature of career patterns toward protean and boundaryless careers, Smith-Ruig (2009) challenged that the blurring of career plateaus and job mobility constructs have created a need to redefine them in current literature. The shift in career patterns to a nonlinear trajectory suggests a reassessment of career boundaries is needed that includes a focus on understanding increased ambiguity of career definitions, blurred lines between work and life roles, and challenging work (Loacker & Śliwa, 2016; Smith-Ruig, 2009) as well as domains of influence and their shifting salience, permeability, and permanence (Rodrigues et al., 2016).

When considering objective and subjective perceptions of job mobility, boundary crossing, and job plateaus, current research has predominantly focused on degreed professionals in the primary job market. However, concerns have been raised suggesting the shift toward self-managed boundaryless careers most benefit highly marketable individuals, while low-qualified individuals may not have the capacity to manage an informed career path. Therefore, low-qualified individuals may bear a higher risk of poor employment outcomes (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008; Rodrigues et al., 2016). Additional concerns were raised noting successful job mobility is not only dependent on individuals' attributes and behaviors; it is also dependent on economic, social, and cultural constraints (Loacker & Śliwa, 2016; Rodrigues et al., 2016). Because current literature focused mainly on the primary job market, there is a lack of understanding in the secondary job market related to low-qualified labors' salient domains, relevant boundaries, and successful boundary crossing (Rodrigues et al., 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this work-in-process grounded theory project is to investigate job mobility paths of low-qualified labor in seeking job mobility for economic gain across organizations through nontraditional career paths in Central Texas. This manuscript is intended to explore human resource professionals' perspectives of low-qualified labors' career success and barriers with intra-organization, cross-organization, and cross-industry job mobility and job plateaus to elucidate successful and unsuccessful paths.

METHOD

This study is a small part of a larger grounded theory project seeking to understand three unique perspectives of low-qualified labor markets' successful and unsuccessful job mobility, including human resource management professionals, workforce development professionals, and individuals within the low-qualified labor market. This manuscript focuses on perspectives of human resource management professionals who hire low-qualified labor, to elucidate their perspectives of how low-qualified labor are successful or unsuccessful in seeking cross-organizational job mobility. Because the purpose of the study is to elucidate a schema that explains job mobility in the low-qualified labor market based on descriptions of the phenomenon from three unique but overlapping perspectives, a grounded theory methodology was utilized. A grounded theory methodology does not use an existing theory, but rather allows the theory to be generated from the data (Creswell, 2013). The grounded theory method is a "systematic, inductive, and comparative approach for conducting inquiry" (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 1).

Participants

This phase of the study sought individuals who work or have worked in a human resource management position for at least two years, recruiting low-qualified labor in the Central Texas area. Participants were solicited from the Central Texas Human Resource Management Association, the Williamson County Human Resource Management Association, professional contacts through LinkedIn, and referrals from participants. Participants were solicited through member listings by email and person-to-person contact at association meetings. A flier with an information sheet was distributed to potential participants, and included sought participant demographics for potential participants to self-evaluate their demographics in meeting the study requirements for participation. Potential participants who indicated

they met the criteria were included, and potential participants who did not meet the criteria were not included in the study.

There were 10 qualifying participants from the Central Texas area. Participation was confidential. To protect the confidentiality of participants and make meaningful cross-industry data relevant, participant numbers were combined with industry identifiers, but organization sizes were presented separately. Participants included three from manufacturing (P01-MFG, P02-MFG, P08-MFG); one from higher education (P03-HE); two from information technology (P04-IT, P09-IT); one from healthcare (P05-HC); one from retail (P06-R); and two from warehouse and transportation (P07-WT, P10-WT). Five participants represented large organizations (500+ employees); four represented medium-sized organizations (150-500 employees), and two represented small organizations (50-150 employees).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through one semi-structured interview lasting 45 to 75 minutes by phone or in person. Follow-up conversations or emails were conducted when needed, such as when a gap in the data emerged. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and edited for accuracy. In-person interviews were conducted at a location of the participant's choice. An interview protocol was used entailing open-ended questions. Audio recordings were identified with participant numbers, with no data linked to participant names.

The data was analyzed using the Straussian approach. The data analysis began with the initial transcript and data unit coding. The data coding began with microanalysis of the data, an open coding process that very closely scrutinizes each data unit to produce summarizing concepts/constructs (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). A bottom-up approach was used where the coding system emerged from the data units. The initial coding was diverse and unstructured. Similar data units were grouped into themes and sub-themes using a constant comparative method: the comparison of one unit of data to another for similarities and differences. Themes and sub-themes were evaluated and compared for potential emerging patterns and arranged by relationships. For example, units were coded with identifiers such as 'Lack of Information and Understanding' and 'Social Affordances.' After the first transcript was coded, the second interview was conducted and coded, and then the first transcript was reevaluated. Additional codes were added if needed. The coding continued in a back-and-forth process as additional interviews were conducted, transcribed, and data was added (Creswell, 2013).

Once the initial data were analyzed with microanalysis, there were a lot of similar codes with low frequency. The possible relationships were conceptualized, allowing themes of similarities to begin emerging, thus creating a category to subsume related low frequency codes. This occurred after the fifth coded transcript, resulting in an emerging code structure. The previous transcripts were reevaluated and previous codes were relabeled or subsumed into the emerging code structure where appropriate. For example, the previous code 'Social Affordances' was recoded as 'Describing Individuals Unsuccessful.' Again, this is a back-and-forth process of continuing to add data. After the sixth transcript was coded, the code structure was networked together to demonstrate the emerging relationships and gaps in relationships between coded themes. As new codes were drawn from additional data, the new code structure was used and the relationships continued to be interrogated for fit and relationships (Creswell, 2013).

Each theme was then analyzed with axial coding, an advanced open-coding process used to closely scrutinize one theme at a time toward the building of core categories (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Axial coding, in the Straussian approach, utilizes a coding paradigm drawn from existing theory or models. The emerging core categories and coding paradigm were used to draw out the emerging structure and phenomenon. The Bryant and Charmaz coding paradigm included the phenomenon (actions and interactions that embody the phenomenon), casual conditions (phenomenon influencers), contexts (phenomenon attributes), intervening conditions (other contributing influencers), and consequences (outcomes of actions and interactions) most relevant to the categories to develop the axis. Then selective coding was used to connect core categories through proposed relationships, and a conditional matrix was used to depict the proposed emerging theory that is grounded in the data (Creswell, 2013).

RESULTS

In this study, perceptions of low-qualified talents' job mobility are drawn from human resource professionals who recruit, select, hire, develop, and retain qualified talent and manage talent pipelines. Results of this study include perceptions of intra-organization and cross-organization job mobility, influencers on successful and unsuccessful job mobility, and other contributing influencers.

Intra-Organization Job Mobility

All of the organizations in this study indicated internal job mobility for employees was easier than job mobility for external employees. However, this mobility was dependent upon internal employees acquiring the required experiences and education or availability of opportunity. The amount and type of education and experienced needed varied widely depending on the job. P09-IT related that "the sales position is based on experience with the products, so it would be somewhat easy for an individual to acquire the skills internally and to move into a sales or customer service position." However, P05-HC stated, "I've had people that were CNAs who have gone back to school to get their nursing degrees, and then they move into a nursing position." When discussing the availability of opportunity, opportunity was often described within the context of a flat organizational structure or a structure with low turnover leading to slower upward job mobility. P08-MFG shared, "It was still difficult for employees to move into the supervisory or management positions, because those positions weren't open very frequently."

When considering education, experiences, and opportunity within organization, successive job mobility (more than one move) was easier within organizations whose workforce was comprised of few positions with bachelor's degrees or higher. Such employers were more likely those in industries such as manufacturing, retail, warehouse and transportation, and information, as well as medium- to large-sized employers. According to P08-MFG, "When looking at the manufacturing employees, there were a lot of stepping stones allowing employees to move from the lowest level through to the higher skilled manufacturing positions." P06-R added, "This is a unique situation in retail, that without jobs or degrees being required it's actually easier for them to successively move higher." Conversely, higher education and healthcare opportunities were likely to result in limited job mobility, because these industries' jobs tended to require higher levels of education. Fewer jobs were available in higher education at the lower education level, while the healthcare industry has more jobs requiring certifications – educational attainment resulting in some college or up to an associate's degree. However, in both the higher education and health care industries, subsequent opportunities for job mobility would require additional continuing education or certification. The income mobility at this level is limited due to the composition of jobs and the large number of degreed professionals within this industry. P05-HC observed, "One level would be if you are [a] CNA then move into a CMA. A lot of people are CNAs first—certified nursing assistants first, then they might go back to school and get their certified medication aid."

Cross-Organization Job Mobility

Job mobility across organizations was primarily discussed as losing employees to other organizations. Losing employees was related to labor shortages, making job mobility easier; increased competition for talent, resulting in compensation strategy being noncompetitive; flat organizational structures leading to internal job mobility plateaus; and otherwise unsuccessful attempts at job mobility within the organization. When describing job mobility that was less successful, this was typically described as lateral job mobility across organizations where the individual encountered a job mobility plateau within a larger geographic area.

Successful job mobility was described by human resource (HR) professionals as competition for talent. A shortage of qualified talent in the lower skilled positions could be related to individuals' attributes or experiences. P06-R from retail stated:

> I think it's not the certification, because at some point we would overlook their certification
> for the right person. I think it's the right person, because we're just not trying to fill positions
> to fill positions—because you got to look at those behaviors and those attitudes. That's what

we focus on more than that skill, that certificate, because anybody can go get that. We've had applicants that we've skipped over that have had certifications that we wanted, but their attitude and their appearance and their demeanor in their interview was just not what we wanted, and we're not going to hire that. Because we can train a monkey to go through this or a robot. We can't train your values and your behavior, that's who you are.

When considering semi-skilled talent, craft workers, and individuals with certifications, it was a labor market shortage of required skills and certifications that led to successful job mobility across organizations. P07-WT stated there is steep competition for CDLA drivers: "They literally can leave me today and go tomorrow and have a job…If they're a clean driver, they can go from me today to another one tomorrow." This group was also more likely to result in the competition for talent raising wage rates. As a result, some organizations had difficulty retaining this talent. P02-MFG added, "I have found people with the needed certifications; they will not accept the job because our wage is so low." This is underscored by P01-MFG, who stated, "Our biggest competition, which worked on tanks and tracked equipment…stole a bunch of our people. And then there was another contractor that stole a lot of our stock clerks, and they would offer more money."

Successful Job Mobility Influencers

There were a variety of influencers on the potential for individuals to be successful in seeking job mobility. Some of these influencers included the individual's choice to continue education, take risks for additional experience, and experience a sense of employee loyalty.

Gained or continued education was cited as an advantage across industries, including higher education, healthcare, information technology, retail, manufacturing, as well as warehouse and transportation industries. It was closely related to descriptions of skilled and motivated employees, but was also described in a variety of forms. This concept also promoted descriptions of individuals who were at risk of being recruited from them by other organizations. These individuals were viewed as ambitious, but also loyal to the organization. P08-MFG described the relationship between motivation, ambition, and continuing education in the context of experiential learning:

> When learning, employees want to be able to practice on actual products. This means there wasn't really a formal stepping stone from an entry-level position into welding, but they could cross-train on their own time. The same was true for machinists; however, with machinists, there were helpers that were able to acquire some of the skills through on-the-job training. A lot of times, the ability to acquire the on-the-job training was dependent on other employees being willing to initiate and provide the training. There was no additional pay for an employee who decided to help out another employee training.

P09-IT described continued education as an employee responsibility: "We are more like a learning organization. So, the individuals who are more likely to be successful are those who are continuously learning—and in particular, those who can demonstrate that they are continuously learning." P06-R, describing a formal employee learning system in retail where perceptions of ambition, motivation, and competence were dependent on employees understanding the organization's system and utilizing it, stated:

> Our learning system assigns you various courses just based on your position.… But you can just go in there, look at it, click it, and self-assign it, and take it when you want. That's how you get your own professional development without somebody making you do it.

Individuals acquiring a certification was more likely to result in perceptions of being qualified by HR professionals and hiring managers in the external environment. Signals to individuals in the external environment reinforced perceptions of value inside the organization. P08-MFG stated, "With the welding positions, a certificate was not necessarily required. However, having the certificate demonstrated a level of skill." For higher education and healthcare, the concept of continuing education was perceived as being

related to more than just knowledge or skill development; it was also expected to be a path to a bachelor's degree or higher. P05-HC stated:

> Well, for example, we had one lady who worked for us as a CNA for a couple of years. During that time, she went to school to get her nursing degree, so she was very dedicated and she had the time to spend where she could work full time and then go to school full time. She didn't have a family, she didn't have other commitments, and she was able to go to school to get her degree and then become a nurse with us.

An individual characterized as being an ambitious risk taker was most commonly cited as an advantage in manufacturing, higher education, information technology, and warehouse and transportation industries. It was closely related to descriptions of continuing education, gaining experience, and adaptability. P03-HE stated, "I would say 75% of the workforce is looking for a job to land in their lap. They're not willing to take the risk to move somewhere else—to go somewhere else and do another job. They're risk-averse." P04-IT also described risk as gaining experiences, "I think organizations like people who take the risk of saying, "Hey, I'm going to put myself out there." If you put yourself out there, you get to be noticed, especially if you're moving, getting more experience."

Being a risk taker was also described as gaining skills and acquiring stretch assignments. P10-WT made the following observation about a candidate coming into a position for the first time:

> Yes, they went through the training program. Yes, they got their CDL. Again, why do I wait two years to hire somebody? Because they're going to make their mistake somewhere else. I want them to bring with them that experience, a combination of the experience and CDL.

P06-R described stretch assignments and their impact: "She's got … stretch assignments to dig into different things, to expose her to different enterprise/global thinking…I believe that's how she got to where she is without having a master's."

Seniority or organizational loyalty was cited as an advantage in higher education, retail, manufacturing, and warehouse and transportation industries. They were closely related to labor shortages, being teachable and having a desire to learn, internal career tracks, employee development programs, and organizational commitment and engagement. P07-WT described the link between loyalty and being teachable:

> These folks are definitely coachable. They want to learn. They just want a better life. A lot of them, they have this—it's a commitment. It's a commitment level to the organization that they want to grow their career there.

P08-MFG demonstrated the link between loyalty and organizational engagement, observing that "some employees were more willing than others to stay late or bend over backwards for their supervisor. It's the employees that they could count on repeatedly to get the job done no matter what." Organizational commitment and engagement were most closely related to loyalty expressed as an understanding of the employee's impact on the larger organization. This was demonstrated in P06-R's observation:

> I think the ones that are moving up really embrace our purpose and who we are, and who we say we are…. You find those individuals that really bought in. They bought into the customer-centric, they bought into our purpose, and they're driving it, and you can see them driving it, and you can see the results of them driving it. Those are the ones that you really see ascend into different positions.

Unsuccessful Job Mobility Influencers

There were a variety of influencers on the potential for individuals to be unsuccessful in seeking job mobility. The most commonly cited issues were poor work ethic, complacent or risk averse, poor communication skills, no additional or continuing education, and lack of understanding.

Poor work ethic was most commonly cited as an issue in the retail and warehouse and transportation industries. It was closely related to descriptions of opposing value systems, unrealistic expectations, no

additional or continuing education, and hard-to-fill positions. Further, individuals with drug convictions or other criminal backgrounds were often viewed as having opposing value systems, and mistakes were often attributed to poor work ethics. P06-R explained this issue of a poor work ethic:

> They don't have ambition beyond just doing that job. We have a high number of call-offs. We have a high number of quits because they don't want to do the work. Sometimes they just don't show up, and then they come back the next night like nothing happened. You're like—[laughs] Working is optional…It happens more than you would like it to happen. So, the whole work ethic thing is a big part of being able to move up… or even to move lateral.

Failing to pursue additional education was the next most commonly cited issue and was commented upon by HR professionals in healthcare, retail, and warehouse and transportation. Lacking additional or continuing education was closely related to perceptions of a poor work ethic and unrealistic expectations, leading to HR professionals perceiving these employees as complacent. Further, lacking drive for continuing education was closely related to managers believing employees did not fully grasp the potential barrier related to inflated expectation of knowledge, skill, and ability in bridging to the next position. Each HR manager who associated lack of continuing education with poor attributes also had tuition assistance programs available for employees. P06-R described this perception:

> If I am the employee working in appliances, and I want to apply for a service manager of appliances, I have to fight everyone else who applies for the same position. But they are hungrier than I am because they're unemployed, and some of them are certified and educated already. They may have gone through a staff reduction at their store, where they may be looking for a promotion. You have to fight for this job, and you're putting yourself in a noncompetitive position if you don't have a certification or education.

Being complacent or risk averse was cited by HR professionals as an influencer on unsuccessful job mobility in manufacturing, higher education, information technology, and healthcare industries. Employees who were viewed as risk averse were most commonly described as working in a flat organization that lacked opportunity and failing to continue one's education. P09-IT stated:

> Well, in our organization we do tend to grow our customer service and sales employees internally. Some individuals want to move higher in income level. Without getting a degree and moving into one of professional positions, that's more difficult. As a small company, there just aren't sufficient numbers of positions that would allow for continued upward mobility. This is even true for the degreed positions. Mostly, I think individuals would be unsuccessful because of lack of opportunity. They would have to go to another organization to move upward. Many of the employees are committed to the organization and so would remain frustrated instead of moving somewhere else.

Interestingly, while being complacent and risk averse was considered a negative attribute, HR professionals also cited lack of seniority or loyalty, lack of organizational commitment, lack of time in position, and unrealistic expectations as issues. P08-MFG described lack of loyalty and lack of organizational commitment:

> Some employees just think their job is from the time they clock in to the time they clock out. When their shift is over, they go home, whether the job is done or not. This means the supervisor is left trying to figure out how to get the job done.

P10-WT expanded on the lack of time in position and unrealistic expectations:
> I think the person becomes a little impatient, so they don't want to gain all the skills… needed to make that next step. Again, the Millennials, my favorite question is, where do you see yourself in five years? Inevitably, everyone says "Five, I'm going to have your job." You know what it took me to get into this position and you're going to do it in five years, really? The expectation is, Why not? I love the can-do attitude, but the reality check's not there.

Their expectation is beyond their capability, so I think they tend to get frustrated, then they go looking for something better. They convince themselves that the next lateral move will move them quicker to the step up that they want. Does that make sense?

Lack of understanding was cited by HR professionals as an influencer on unsuccessful job mobility in manufacturing and warehouse and transportation industries. It was related to unrealistic expectations; however, it was also described as not understanding or not having sufficient information about internal organization and external career tracks. P08-MFG stated:

I remember one employee who was really frustrated. He wanted to move up within the organization but he didn't have the time or the inclination or the money—or whatever it was—to go back to get an education or a degree. He worked in manufacturing, he just wanted to work his way up in manufacturing. He just didn't know how, so I think maybe lack of information on career progression?

P10-WT also described this issue as employees making uninformed choices to move laterally across organizations:

I see people thinking I go here, I'm going to go up; but it's really a lateral move that they're not picturing it that way. People don't want to necessarily put the work in to earn the next step or to be qualified for the next step. They convince themselves that making this move— which is really not a step forward, it's just step to the side—is advancement for them. … but you're doing the same thing you did before, it's just a different place.

P06-R expanded on this issue related to the realities of the selection process:

A lot of people, they look at the minimum and the preferred job requirements for the next higher position. Just because you have the minimum doesn't mean you are the most competitive person when applying. That comes back to unrealistic expectations. You don't need associate's [degree]? You don't need certification? You don't need bachelor's [degree]? But how are you marketing yourself in being the most competitive person in the applicant pool without them?

Poor communication skills were cited by HR professionals as an influencer on unsuccessful job mobility in manufacturing, retail, and warehouse and transportations industries. The inability to communicate orally or in writing was typically used to describe what prevented an otherwise qualified individual from obtaining successful job mobility. P06-R described the written communication problem related to resumes:

When I post the job…the applicant pool is so large, the problem for the most part of it is deciphering the experience, and kind of pulling it out there resume because it's not there. They'll have the year, date, and company they work for going back like five, seven years, but on the resume, it doesn't show. What did you do there? How successful were you? What can you do for me? I don't see it. That's the biggest problem.

P01-MFG described lack of oral communication in the interview process between a current employee and a manager, saying, "I used to coach them on those, and a lot of them had the experience, but they didn't know how to talk about it. In other words, they were intimidated or shy in the interview process."

Cross-Organization Job Mobility Influencers

While most organizations said internal job mobility was easier, across-organization job mobility was more likely to occur. Organizations preferred internal job mobility to enable them to retain those individuals who had the desired and needed knowledge, experience, and attributes. However, the most frequent issue undermining this preference was a flat organizational structure. P09-IT stated:

As a small company, there just aren't sufficient numbers of positions that would allow for continued upward mobility. This is even true for the degreed positions. Mostly, I think

individuals would be unsuccessful because of lack of opportunity. They would have to go to another organization to move upward.

This resulted in a lack of available opportunity for successive job mobility in a timely manner and was more likely to result in across-organization job mobility in manufacturing, healthcare, information technology, higher education, warehouse and transportation, retail, and information technology. P01-MFG observed that "the master mechanic had an easier time moving up to the supervisor, but that was really time and space limited." P02-MFG added, "It's just a harder upper mobility, because there aren't that many slots to be moved up into as a promotion." The flattened organizational structure and lack of opportunity have also caused an increase in more frequent across-organization job mobility, which is also becoming more expected, as noted in the description of risk takers. P10-WT related:

The old rule of thumb was four to five years [at one job]. I think that's changing, I think if you're smart, when you look at it, the different industries will dictate that. But I think 18 months is becoming the new norm. In a lot of companies, in 18 months you're the senior person. The Millennial Effect, if nothing else, is forcing us to accept and realize the fact that the American workers no longer work by the company's rules, because the supply-demand shift has happened and they're in the driver's seat now. Because there is more of us needing them than there are of them out there. I think they're redefining what's acceptable. And as much as we want to say, "We're not going to do that," those are the companies that are going to have trouble. Those are the companies that if you continue to say, "I'm not going to hire someone unless they got four or five years of experience" — Okay, well how long can that position stay open? … Supply and demand is in the candidate's favor right now.

Other Contributing Influencers

Labor surpluses influence unsuccessful job mobility. Labor surpluses were described as bumping down or losing jobs to overqualified applications, steep competition for jobs, and downgrading or skilled workers accepting lower-level skilled jobs. P06-R described the bumping down effect that increases the needed knowledge, skills, and ability to be selected for the job:

It's the number of individuals who are applying for the position that push up the requirements; so, to be competitive, you need that master's degree. To be competitive, you need that certification. So, when they're picking the most qualified as opposed to the minimum qualifications, I think minimum when we ask for a bachelor's degree, and they almost always hire the master's degree and certification.

This was also framed as overqualified, skilled applicants taking positions well below their level. P06-R also described the effect of downgrading skilled workers:

I think it's primarily associate's that are in those positions, but then just like the lady I just hired with the doctorate …she's going to apply [to] jobs and she's going to get them because her experience and certification far outweighs the other candidates. You have to find a reason not to have selected her at an interview... She's going to get advancement where other people won't because of the paper [degree] she has in her hand.

Motivations perceived by HR professionals for those who were seeking job mobility across organizations were described as either seeking to leave a negative employment situation, such as poor management, seeking economic gains, or a career transition. P01-MFG described their difficulty in retaining talent when working with a poor manager: "We had one team leader, in particular, who had a tremendous turnover because he was not a good team leader…He just couldn't shake the fact that he's no longer a first sergeant and can't yell at his people." HR professionals were more likely to cite seeking economic gains as the reason for losing talent. When economic gain and negative working conditions were present, then talent was more likely to accept a lateral move for minimal economic gains. P02-MFG observed such a move "is a good move for them: it's more money and retirement benefits. It would be a

lateral for them. You're moving over, but it's probably a slight step up in pay, but it's a better job security."

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study provides insights from human resource professionals' experiences with recruiting and managing low-qualified talent pipelines. This study reveals that job mobility and job mobility plateaus were portrayed in a variety of ways by HR professionals when describing both those who were successful and unsuccessful in seeking job mobility. Job mobility issues were expressed as resulting from individual attributes (attribute-based), flattening organizational structures (sponsor-based), lacking continuing education (contest-based), and lacking understanding—notable findings.

Attribute-Based Job Mobility Issues

Attribute-based mobility is typically described as employability related to specific attitudes or behaviors (Ashford & Taylor, 1990; Clarke & Patrickson, 2008; Fugate & Kinicki, 2008). In this study, individuals' attributes created job mobility plateaus—or negative issues related to dissonance in the employee's employment relationship or applicant's disqualification from a job opportunity. The most prevalent negative issues in this study included poor work ethics and mismatched expectations between employees and managers. However, the most interesting item under individual attributes across industries was poor communication skills, which can also be framed as a competency. Several HR professionals noted that an otherwise qualified employee would be unable to obtain intra-organization or cross-organization job mobility due to lack of confidence, inability to articulate critical skills, or inaccurately reflecting relevant skills and abilities in resumes. Overall, this group was part of the qualified talent pipeline for low-skilled and semi-skilled workers who were failing to obtain sponsor-based job mobility based on communication skills alone. This confirms concerns about negative outcomes related to low-qualified employees self-managing career development without relevant feedback on skill deficiencies (Loacker & Śliwa, 2016; Rodrigues et al., 2016).

Sponsor-Based Job Mobility Issues

Sponsor-based mobility relates to organization sponsored mobility through on-the-job training, internal career tracks, and supervisor support (Becker, 1993; De Vos et al., 2011; Ng et al., 2005). Flattened organizational structures were described as a constraint, creating a lack of opportunity that was compounded by low turnover and slow upward progression. However, in the healthcare and higher education industries, low-qualified labor experienced truncated early career plateaus due to lack of formal educational attainment related to the previously mentioned gap between primary and secondary jobs. On the other hand, in the information technology, manufacturing, retail industries, the opportunity for sponsor-based job mobility was more prevalent due to their value for informal and non-formal education, as well as structured career paths. In addition, while movement into leadership, supervisory, or management positions was easier for internal employees, extending current literature, the lack of opportunity from flattened structures made boundary-crossing mobility more likely *and* more successful (Drucker-Godard et al., 2014; King, Burke, & Pemberton, 2005).

The most notable exceptions were warehouse and transportation and some manufacturing organizations. In these organizations, the movement out of skilled craft positions—which often required a certification—into leadership, supervisory, or management positions would require a substantial reduction in income. For employees in these organizations, income mobility within a job category was more important than job mobility into greater positions of responsibility. This outcome adds to current literature on domains of influence and shifting salience for low-qualified talent (Rodrigues et al., 2016; Xie, Xin, & Bai, 2016).

Contest-Based Job Mobility

Contest-based mobility is the development of competence as a means of job mobility (De Vos et al., 2011; Ng et al., 2005). Lack of continuing education created contest-based job mobility plateaus, or the inability to move to successively higher positions in responsibility or pay without additional demonstration of education—either informal, non-formal, or formal education. However, a notable finding in this study was that while higher education and healthcare organizations resulted in early contest-based job mobility plateaus without continuing education toward a bachelor's degree or higher, income within manufacturing and warehouse and transportation was not negatively impacted by lower educational attainment—meaning higher income levels could be reached. This notable outcome may explain why the BLS shows higher income levels at the point of having some college rather than the attainment of an associate's degree (2015).

Further, extending literature on career success, the demonstration of informal and non-formal learning was more critical in the manufacturing, warehouse and transportation, retail, and information technology industries. Organizations in these industries had job compositions requiring mostly lower education attainment levels—high school diploma or some college. De Vos, De Hauw, and Van der Heijden's (2011) findings indicated competency development opportunities were likely to increase self-perceptions of employability, marketability, and subsequent career success. However, in this study, HR professionals indicated that pursuits of informal and non-formal learning opportunities—even pursuits unrelated to job requirements—increased organizations' perception of an individual's employability and potential boundary crossing through attribute-based job mobility. The pursuit of informal and non-formal learning opportunities signaled the perception that individuals were highly desirable, in that they were skilled, motivated, and marketable in the external job market. These results suggest that organizations in certain industries whose job compositions have fewer jobs requiring a bachelor's degree or higher may result in easier and more meaningful attribute-based job mobility for income gains.

Career Success and Understanding Job Mobility Expectations

Lack of understanding created job mobility plateaus—preventing career success— due to individuals' inability to make connections between attribute-based mobility, contest-based mobility, and boundary crossing, as well as their impacts on applicant selection outcomes in the hiring process. Extending literature on unsuccessful boundary crossing, participants in this study described lack of understanding as unrealistic expectations about career progression and job mobility, as well as making poorly informed boundary-crossing decisions resulting in lateral moves for very little income gain (Ashford & Taylor, 1990; Clarke & Patrickson, 2008). This often resulted in individuals leaving too soon—i.e. being a job hopper, failing to adequately develop skills, or failing to become qualified for the next step up. Lack of understanding in the selection and hiring process related to applicants' naïve assumptions that meeting the minimum requirements for positions not incurring a labor shortage was sufficient for successful boundary crossing job mobility with economic gains.

Lack of understanding negatively impacted sponsor-based mobility, due to individuals failing to understand their role in the larger organization and how their position impacts others, as well as the consequences of their actions on others and the organization as a whole. Further, this study found that areas in which individuals lacked understanding entailed career progression—job mobility within and across organizations—as well as role ambiguity. Previous research presented concerns about potentially poor employment outcomes for low-qualified labor from increased responsibility for self-managed career planning (Clarke & Patrickson, 2008; Rodrigues et al., 2016). Outcomes from this study affirm concerns indicating low-qualified labor was more likely to experience early job mobility plateaus and truncated income gains from inaccurate, limited, or irrelevant labor market and career information. Expanding on current literature, results from this study suggest individuals within the low-qualified labor market, as well as semi-skilled and skilled labor not incurring a labor shortage, need relevant and accurate information and advice on both the advantages and disadvantages of job mobility through individual-centered career planning and organization-centered career planning to make effective decisions for career success (Loacker & Śliwa, 2016).

Limitations of the Present Study

This study is a work-in-process entailing the perspectives of ten human resource professionals within the Central Texas area across multiple industries. The low number of participants limits the robustness of the data. Additional participants are needed to achieve data saturation. In particular, the limited number of individuals represented within different industries limits the transferability of results across organizations and industries.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study suggests cross-organizational and cross-industry job mobility affordances may be obtained by low-qualified talent participating in non-formal education and continuing informal education as a signal of employability. Therefore, future research is needed to delineate the job mobility link between informal, non-formal, and formal education and boundary crossing. In addition, this study affirmed the concern that low-qualified individuals may be at a disadvantage when employing protean attitudes toward job mobility, resulting in less meaningful and less successful boundary crossing. Further, the notable outcome, lack of understanding by low-qualified individuals related to job mobility, job mobility plateaus, and boundary crossing suggests a unique phenomenon may be experienced by this group in the job market. In particular, early outcomes suggest manufacturing and warehouse and transportation organizations provide greater upward income mobility for those who choose not to pursue a 4-, 6-, or 8-year post-secondary degree; and individuals choosing an education-dense industry such as higher education or healthcare should pursue incrementally higher education levels to attain greater upward income mobility. Finally, previous research suggested career identity is a key influencer on reducing occupational boundary crossing for individuals whose educational attainment includes a 4-, 6-, or 8-year post-secondary degree (Rodrigues et al., 2016); however, future research needs to identify the key boundary crossing contributors for low-qualified individuals.

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