



## Conversations with the Experts

“Protean Career” By Brad Harrington, Ed.D.



Tim Hall, Ph.D.

**Bio:** Douglas T. (Tim) Hall is the Director of the Executive Development Roundtable and a Professor of Organizational Behavior in the School of Management at Boston University. He is also a core faculty member of the Human Resources Policy Institute. He received his graduate degrees from the Sloan School of Management at M.I.T. Hall has authored or co-authored numerous articles and books and has served on the editorial boards of eight scholarly journals. His research and consulting activities have dealt with career development, women's careers, career plateauing, work/family balance, and executive succession. He has served as a consultant to organizations such as Sears, AT&T, General Electric, Honeywell, Ford Motor Company, Eli Lilly, the World Bank, and the United States Army.



Brad Harrington, Ed.D.

**Bio:** Brad Harrington is the Executive Director of the Center for Work & Family at Boston College and is a member of the Organizational Studies faculty at the Boston College Carroll School of Management. Prior to his current role, Brad was Managing Director of the Center for Corporate Citizenship. Before coming to Boston College, Brad spent 20 years with Hewlett-Packard Company in a variety of executive positions in human resources, quality, and education. His roles included leadership positions at the division, region, and corporate levels both in the US and Europe. He has also consulted with many major corporations and healthcare institutions.

Brad holds a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration from Stonehill College, a Master's degree in Psychology from Boston College, and a Doctorate in Human Resource Development from Boston University. He has published a number of articles and case studies and his primary research has been in the areas of organizational learning and career development.

**Editors Note:** Professor Douglas T. (Tim) Hall of Boston University has been a thought leader in the field of career management for more than 30 years. This August, he was awarded the Everett Cherrington Hughes award for his lifetime contributions to the field by the Careers Division of the Academy of Management. Tim spoke with Brad Harrington, the new Executive Director for the Boston College Center for Work & Family (CWF), about his work in the career field and its relation to work/life. Prior to coming to CWF, Harrington worked with Hewlett-Packard for 20 years where he developed HP's career management program in the mid-1980s. Hall and Harrington have maintained an ongoing academic-practitioner dialogue since that time.

### An Interview with Tim Hall

**Harrington:** Tim, we have known each other for nearly twenty years and have seen a lot of changes in the world of work. What would you say have been the major trends/changes in career development?

**Hall:** When *Careers in Organizations* came out in 1976, the concept of the “protean career” was just speculation about the future. Today, I think it is part of the way people live. For years, a lot of people, including you and me, have discussed the changing “psychological contract.” Even in companies like HP where the contract wasn't broken, it still changed a great deal. In many other companies the contract was broken. What happened just continues to reinforce that the world is totally different now. People are going to have to really be much more independent and find their own ways to build their own resources and build their own secure base.

**Harrington:** Maybe the good news about that is that people will really see that the locus of control for their career is in themselves.

**Hall:** Yes, that is true. Now that I can see the “protean career” up-close I can see both sides—the upside you just mentioned and the not so positive elements. It can certainly be very stressful, when people suddenly find themselves out of job. They’ve tried to build something in a particular line of work or a particular organization and suddenly, they are looking for something different. It puts much more stress on people. In the face of all the adaptation people need to make, it is really hard to maintain your sense of identity, of who you are. If you are constantly coping with major loss or change, you don’t think about higher level ideas. It is hard to maintain a sense of identity. The lack of security makes it difficult.

**Harrington:** At one time, leading employers were playing a large role in determining the career paths of individuals through manpower planning, succession planning, job rotation, and company moves/ transfers. Has this changed in light of the new employer/ employee contract and currently, what is the role for organizations in facilitating career development?

**Hall:** Yes, the role has changed. With the ‘protean career,’ some people are saying there really is no role for the organization — the ‘boundaryless career’ is up to the individual. My feeling is that oversimplifies it. There still is a strong role for the organization. It means a different role—we are not going to have the highly structured approaches we had in the past. I don’t hear as much about career planning any more.

The work you did at HP in the 80’s was pioneering. You were emphasizing self-assessment, equipping the individual to define what was important to them, diagnose what opportunities exist in the organization, and provide support to people to go in the direction that they wanted to go.

I think the role of the organization now is more modest but just as important. It includes things like meaningful job assignments, building developmental relationships, and helping people learn how to learn from their experiences and from others. The trick is—‘How can organizations help in all these areas when there isn’t a big, programmatic, systematic approach?’

**Harrington:** Some key themes that seem to surface when you speak include helping employees develop skills to do their own career management, helping them develop good relational skills to build both one-to-one relations or within networks, providing opportunities for learning, and just being flexible.

**Hall:** I agree. The irony is if you look at any one of those you might say there is nothing earth shaking about that. People might look and say there is no ‘sexy program’ there. But if an organization is working on all of those fronts, and able to provide all of those things, that can have very high impact. All organizations are trying to develop adaptability in their workforce and each of these elements is important. Many traditional company career programs didn’t engender this sense of adaptability.

**Harrington:** When we think about the concept of the ‘protean career,’ how is this impacting the work/life discussion? Where do you see these two concepts coming together and how are changing career models helping (or hindering) the attainment of work/life balance?

**Hall:** When I look back to my 1976 book, work-life did not exist as a field. The field is now established and people know the importance of it. A lot that we know about career development can be applied to a work-life discussion.

**Harrington:** In what we have been saying about the importance of the employees taking control of things?

**Hall:** The whole idea of the ‘protean career’ is not just about defining what’s good for you, but also your family and the community. What am I contributing to the community?

One of the things we can do now in the work-life arena is move away from the ‘conflict paradigm.’ So much of the work/life research has looked at conflict between work and personal life. Perhaps we can learn more about what are the competencies, i.e. self-knowledge, priority setting, adaptability, etc. that help people learn to cope with these conflicts. At a higher level of development, people come to see themselves and their roles as interconnected.

On the other end of the spectrum, we can possibly learn more about work/life issues by simply looking at people’s daily lives and their everyday transitions, like commuting to work and back. This provides a great microcosm of understanding the transitions between work and home. Doing qualitative research on people who make these daily transitions effectively might help us better understand what are those metacompetencies that help people manage these changes and transitions.

**Harrington:** I've always believed that work/life balance is determined by the hundreds of small decisions people make in their daily life. (Will I take on the extra assignment? Do I really need to travel to the West Coast for that meeting?) It is the cumulative affect of these decisions that translates to an effective balance. The question is— 'Are these day to day decisions being driven by a clear sense of priorities?' If so, this congruence creates work /life balance.

**Hall:** I think that's a great way to say it. It is the tiny little everyday decisions. Unless you've sorted these priorities ahead of time, these decisions come at you very fast and you are going to have difficulty making them in a way that will add up to a balanced and integrated life. Boundaryless careers and the technology that has made our work/life boundaries so permeable make life more stressful and puts more decisions and responsibility on the individual to find this balance.

When you hear the stories from tragic terrorist attacks on September 11, about the victims or near victims—there were people who made decisions to delay traveling or to go ahead with their plans—decisions that saved their lives or turned out in a tragic way. The question is— 'At the time of the tragedy, were these people living their lives the way they wanted to live them?'

### Related Publications by Tim Hall

Hall, D.T. (2001). *Careers in and out of organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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Hall, D.T. & Associates. (1996). *The career is dead- long live the career: A relational approach to careers*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

Arthur, M. B., Hall, D.T., & Lawrence, B.S. (1983). *Handbook of career theory*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

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Hall, F. & Hall, D.T. (1979). *The two career couple*. Reading MA: Addison-Wesley.

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