

Career adaptability, flexible expertise and innovation – learning while working across the life-course

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Abstract

In rapidly changing working environments, it is striking that some highly skilled workers cope much more readily with, or are likely to initiate, change than others. My recent work has focused upon why this is the case, looking both at individual differences in career adaptability and changes to collective routines facilitated by the application of flexible expertise. Combining both these strands it is possible to frame the question: are there particular ways of thinking that are conducive to supporting innovation in organisations and, if so, how can these ways of thinking be supported, when routine and standardization of approach also offer clear benefits for organizational effectiveness.

In a qualitative study of 64 workers in the UK and Norway an investigation was made of career adaptability: the capability of an individual to make a series of successful transitions where the labour market, organisation of work and underlying occupational and organisational knowledge bases may all be subject to considerable change (Brown *et al.*, 2012). Using this definition, it was possible to focus on the practical implications of career adapt-abilities competencies, alongside the drivers for their development at the individual level.

This approach distinguished between personality characteristics related to adaptability (like being proactive or flexible) that can be regarded as pre-requisites of adaptive behaviour, alongside the psycho-social self-regulatory competencies that shape career adaptive strategies and behaviours within work. It highlights the need for individuals to self-regulate to accommodate employment-related change, yet acknowledges change can also be driven either by an individual seeking new challenges or wishing to adopt new perspectives associated with engagement in substantive personal development. Because adaptability is closely linked to identity development, the willingness to engage with a complex career trajectory, rather than seeking stability, is likely to vary amongst individuals.

Four key dimensions emerged relating to the role of learning in developing career adapt-abilities at work: learning through challenging work (including mastering the practical, cognitive and communicative demands linked with particular work roles and work processes); updating a substantive knowledge base (or mastering a new additional substantive knowledge base); learning through (and beyond) interactions at work; and being self-directed and self-reflexive.

Earlier work reported by Nieuwenhuis & Brown (2009) had focused upon the development of flexible expertise where skilled workers were able to adapt their expertise rapidly and smoothly to different tasks, functions and/or environments. Flexible expertise could support innovation in the sustainable change of collective routines (Hoeve and Nieuwenhuis, 2006), but changing collective routines can be challenging as issues of cognition, practice, culture and identity are all at stake, both

at the individual and collective level. Brown (2005) had highlighted how the success of small and medium size companies could partly depend on the way they handled, either explicitly or implicitly, the gradual development of 'skilled incompetence' (Argyris, 1990). For some companies the current way of doing things, including the constant search for and focus upon technical development, meant they neglected more strategic considerations, including plans for the professional growth of staff and opportunities to reflect systematically on their ways of interacting externally. Several effects of the accumulation of 'skilled incompetence' (Argyris, 1990) might be expected in an organisation that does not develop specific plans for professional growth. A company's small-size allows fast knowledge sharing among people, ensuring less dependence on a single resource and improves role flexibility. Yet the company's model of investment on human resources should be developed in order to comply with conditions of both keeping key human resources and achieving long-term objectives.

How can a drift towards skilled incompetence be challenged? By the development of a flexible expertise that comprises two dimensions. First, the development of expertise should itself be viewed as a continuing process. Thus even if employees are able to produce competent performance in a range of more or less challenging work settings, there has to be a facility within teams or the workforce as a whole to go beyond this. From this perspective, it is interesting that some companies are explicitly using a developmental view of expertise that goes well beyond expecting technical proficiency and a commitment to continuing improvement. Thus some companies, working in technologically advanced sectors, who build up competence inventories of their staff differentiate between:

- Those who are technically able to perform a task but have very limited practical experience of actually doing so (e.g. could use in an emergency or, if necessary, for a one-off activity);
- Those who have successfully performed the task on a small number of occasions (e.g. could use if wish to develop their expertise further; in a support role or if time is not necessarily a key criterion);
- Those who have performed the task many times and under a variety of conditions (i.e. experienced worker standard – completely reliable);
- Those who have substantial experience but are also able to support the learning of others (i.e. they can perform a coaching or mentoring role);
- Those who are world class, that is they are able to think through and, if necessary, bring about changes in the ways that tasks are tackled (e.g. could be chosen as a team leader for performance improvement activities).

The interesting thing here is that this approach to professional development recognises the importance of having a capacity to support the learning of others as well a capacity to change the way things are done.

Second, flexible expertise could be partly built around recognition of the importance of the integration of different kinds of knowledge. Professionals and other highly skilled workers often find that the most important workplace tasks and problems require the integrated use of several different kinds of knowledge, and this can be particularly challenging for those just 'starting out' in their careers. This is the real challenge: predominantly education-based routes and predominantly work-based routes will lead to the development of different types of knowledge, but in many occupations either will be insufficient as it is the combination and integration of different types of knowledge that is often the major challenge. From this perspective looking at the transition from one form of training to work is really focusing upon the wrong transition – the key transition is not from training to work, but from training to

experienced worker status. This shift of perspective would enable people to look at immediate post-qualifying period as a time in which a great deal of learning takes place and to recognise that the degree of support an individual receives at that time could have more significance for their ultimate success than the type of pathway they followed in training. People early in their careers learn a great deal from challenges at work, provided that they receive support as required, because without this they feel overwhelmed and may start to lack confidence in their own abilities. Eraut *et al.* (2004) highlight how people learn most effectively when a virtuous circle of confidence, support and challenge is created.

So the challenge of skilled incompetence may be overcome if a more developmental view of expertise is embraced and employees are supported in the combination and integration (and development) of different types of knowledge. More generally, however, are there particular ways of thinking that are conducive to supporting innovation in organisations and, if so, how can these ways of thinking be supported. Imagination is one amplifier of learning and in relation to innovation the use of imagination to solve problems, imagine futures, see the perspective of others is one valuable asset. More disciplined enquiry is also important: investigation, experimentation and critical reasoning. The challenge is to combine the rational and empirical with the more emotional and intuitive. The expertise necessary to underpin innovation requires concentration, practice, organization, focus and discipline, but also an immaterial component connected to feeling, sense and identity as well as requiring critical thinking and self-reflexivity. The paper will explore how far it is possible to develop particular sets of skills, knowledge, understanding and ways of thinking, being and doing, while at the same time developing dispositions which go beyond these particular developments in responding to new challenges: curiosity, resourcefulness (including learning from others), resilience, ability to support the learning of others, taking responsibility for self-development and reflexivity.

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