

Changing careers and identities: the role of learning and working in developing career adaptability across the life-course

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Career adaptability

Context

- Changing context for career development
- Transitions & life-course perspective

Research

- Qualitative evaluation of career adaptability
- 64 career biographies from England & Norway

Findings

- Key findings
- Implications for career development

Nature of transitions

- Multiple role changes
- Adjustments at many different levels
- Transformational shifts in perspectives as careers unfold



Employability?

Adaptability?

First transition:
Single goal?

What if unemployed?
Role of education?

Multiple transitions;
Employment in the future?

Education: wider
value; other roles

Prepared for
employment or
unemployment?

Need for lifelong learning

- Formal and informal
- Dynamic engagement across the lifespan:
 - up-skilling,
 - re-skilling,
 - re-entry,
 - re-direction



Career Support: Raising the Game?

Public Policy

Recognition of the need to:

- raise individual aspiration
- encourage greater autonomy
- promote lifelong learning
- promote career management skills (but need for understanding of labour market too)

Careers support

Emphasising its utility:

- across the life-course
- vulnerability to being 'locked into' particular ways of working & thinking
- stimulate & support adaptability & employability

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 be subject to considerable change’

Ref: Bimrose, J., Barnes, S-A., Brown, A. and Hughes, D.
(2011) 'The role of career adaptability in skills supply', Wath-upon-Deane: UK Commission for Employment & Skills

Research study

- Explicitly qualitative – linked to European survey
- Interview data from 64 interviews with adults
- Secondary data analysis – 32 Norwegian interviews
- Primary data analysis – 32 UK interviews
- Participation - voluntary
- Preference given to those who had changed career &/or worked in relatively low skilled occupations
- Full details of sample in ‘Technical Report’ (online)

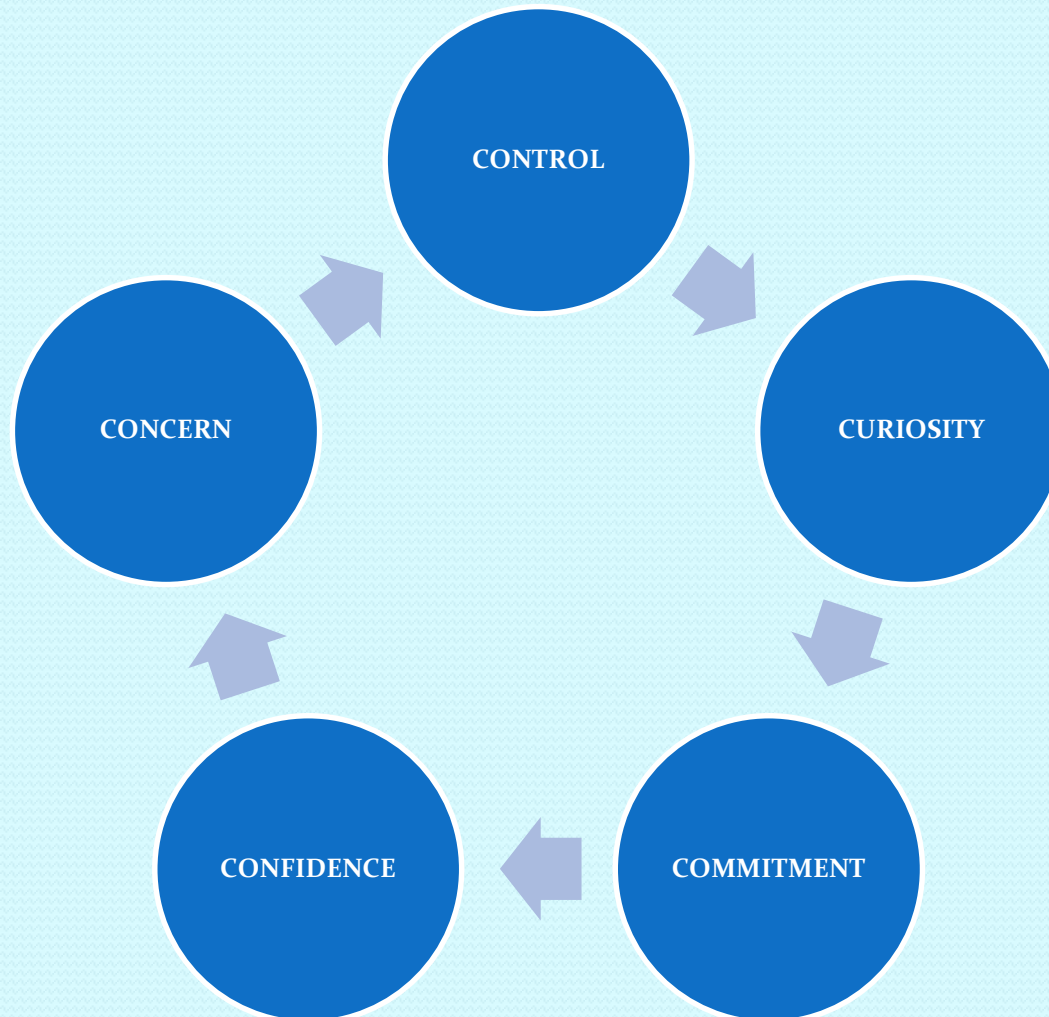
Career summaries of some of UK interviewees:

- nurse specialist to lecturer in cancer nursing
- Environmental chemist in R & D to head of health & safety
- Learning and development posts to learning and life coach
- Personnel management to learning and development coach
- Engineering posts to project manager in manufacturing
- Law, finance and accountancy to Chief Executive UK Regulator
- Management & technology consultant to Assistant TV Producer
- Marketing & IT; midwife; commissioning children's services
- radiographer, specialist sonographer to HE lecturer Ultrasound
- librarian, portfolio worker, health information specialist to consultant
- materials scientist, technical consultant to innovation consultant
- head of HR for four banks to providing pension trustee services.

Career summaries of some of Norwegian interviewees:

- Technical maritime post to self-employed software consultant
- Teacher to technical engineer oil and gas projects
- Internal promotions to project manager in oil supply industry
- Development manager to technical post in oil and gas supply
- Delivery manager to project manager in oil supply firm
- Engineering jobs to senior technical manager oil gas supply
- Technical jobs to oil industry quality & safety manager
- Clinician to chief physician, epidemiologist, researcher
- Nursing roles to psychiatric emergency head nurse
- Clinical roles to special physical therapist in a pain clinic
- Anaesthesia nurse to research coordinator

Career Adaptive Competencies



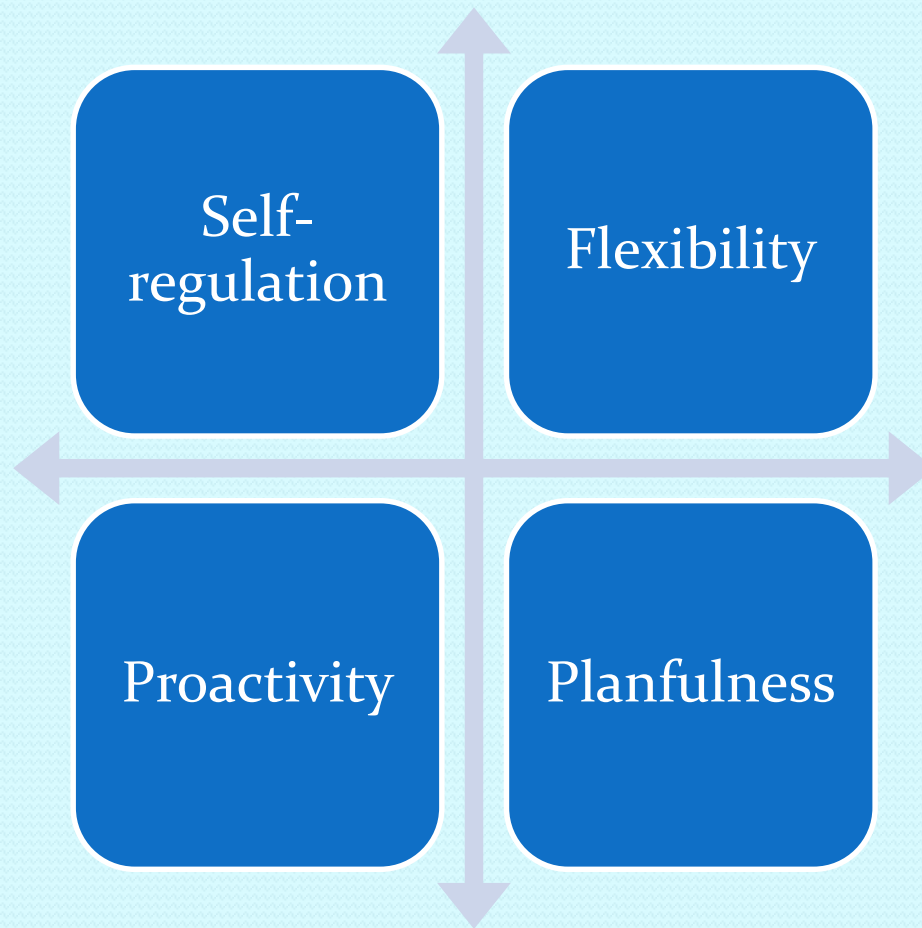
Career Adaptable Competencies

- **Control:** exerting a degree of influence on their situations
- **Curiosity:** broadening horizons by exploring social opportunities & possibilities
- **Commitment:** experimenting with new & different activities
- **Confidence:** believing in yourself & ability to achieve your goal
- **Concern:** developing a positive optimistic attitude to the future

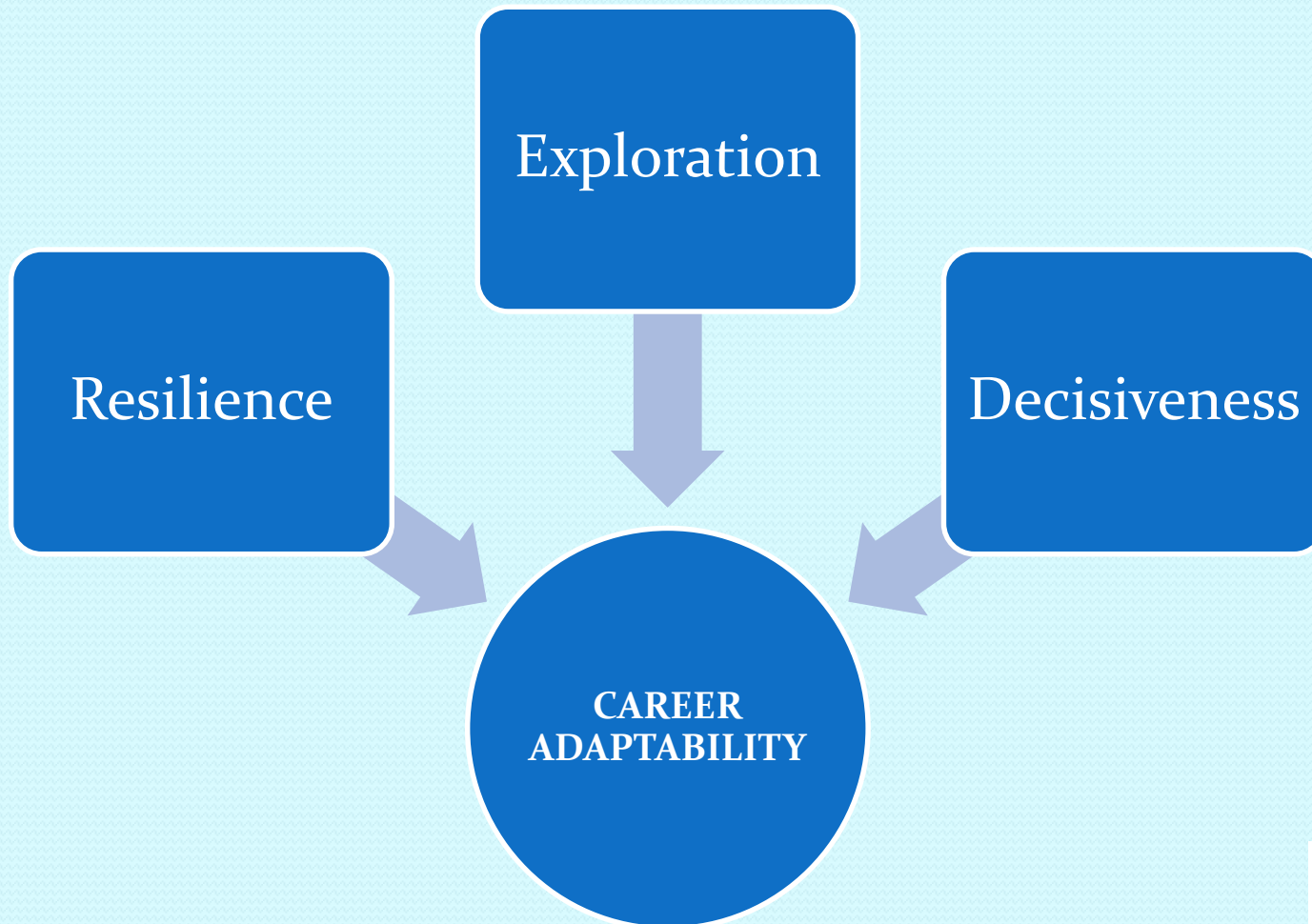
Reference: Savickas et al. (2009). Life designing: A paradigm for career construction in the 21st Century. In *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 75, 3, pp.239-250.



Personality characteristics



Career adaptability: associated concepts



Role of learning in developing adaptability at work:

- learning through challenging work (or 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;
- being self-directed and self-reflexive.

Learning through challenging work:

- ‘My new job involved me in a steep learning curve’.
- ‘My new job was technologically challenging, exciting products to work with and I am very good at adapting. It is important to be open and flexible’.
- ‘Learning while working in a project has its benefits; working together towards a concrete goal and with people and groups that are dynamic’.
- ‘Feeling of being good at what you do, to master the job – to be able to work purposefully’.
- ‘My learning while working has enriched me: it is healthy to switch jobs. I look forward to changes.’
- ‘Gained all my skills in the film industry on-the-job and through work experience, willing to ask how to do things when I do not know how’.
- ‘Enjoy learning, think it is integral to working in IT, it is important to keep up-to-date – 3D graphics is a field which is moving fast’.
- ‘Really excited about this opportunity and what it could lead to. I learnt most when doing challenging work’.
- ‘I learned through challenging work; lots of interaction; learned about organisational cultures and management of change’.

Learning to adapt through updating a substantive knowledge base

- specialist professional qualifications, apprenticeship, vocational training.
- initial studies relevant to current jobs, even when working in a different occupational area
- learned particular ways of thinking and practising
- actual knowledge base often required considerable updating: through work activities career development activities away from work: courses etc.

‘Took formal qualifications in leadership and management; coaching supervision; and reflective practice’;

Completed an MSc Learning and Development: an Action Learning MSc ;

- substantive provision creating a platform for future career development:

‘Enabled me to draw together learning, experiences and other qualifications.

‘Gave me a good grounding in management and technical skills – the value of formal study is that it teaches you to write and make things explicit.’

‘Important process for intellectual development, more critical way of thinking and adds depth to your approach.’

Learning through challenging work and updating knowledge building a platform for adapting to work in other fields:

- UK Example: Her ten years working in safety critical environments (defence and engineering) produced a commitment to rigour and precision.
- Benefits in own work subsequently, but had to adapt to different attitudes and cultures in other environments.
- Paradox: develop a particular way of thinking and practising, but then learn when not to apply that particular approach.
- Mastery of a knowledge base (ways of thinking and practising) is itself a skill (or art) which can be transferred.
- Without initial rigorous base of particular ways of knowing, thinking and practising, individuals can struggle when faced with complex problems at work.
- Adaptable individuals adapt when working in teams or when dealing with clients, customers or patients.

- level of engagement beyond simple up-dating;
- rather, driven by a desire for sense-making and developing their own identity at work.
- seeing their professional identities and personal identities as being complementary
- process of knowledge updating and re-contextualisation

Learning to adapt through interactions at work:

- open question whether interactions at work lead to substantive learning and development, but rich interactions do provide opportunities for substantive development.
- ‘learning by interacting’ – key component in learning-rich jobs, learn from interacting with patients, colleagues, customers, clients etc..
- ‘The job at the cancer centre - you have to deal with many situations spontaneously and with the patients’ emotions. ...need a good working environment and support of colleagues. There are a lot of opportunities to learn...interdisciplinary learning...’
- ‘We have a working environment where you learn from each other’
- ‘I have to negotiate with clients all the time in order to get new work’.
- Personal networks
- Taking opportunities outside formal work role: e.g. Representative.
- Supporting the learning of others
- Emotional development

Learning to adapt through self-directed learning and self-reflexiveness:

- at work, being self-directed in terms of taking advantage of learning opportunities is helpful for individual development (Bimrose and Brown, 2010).
- Eraut (2009) argues it can involve willingness to engage in a wide range of activities such as:
 - asking questions;
 - getting information;
 - finding key people to support you;
 - listening and observing;
 - learning from mistakes;
 - giving and receiving feedback;
 - trying things out;
 - independent study;
 - and working for a qualification.

Implications

- CPD could encourage the use of career narratives and the application of career adaptive competencies
- Learning through challenging work (including mastering the practical, cognitive, relational and emotional demands);
- updating a substantive knowledge base (or mastering a new additional substantive knowledge base);
- learning through (and beyond) interactions at work;
- being self-directed and self-reflexive.
- Linking the rational & empirical with the emotional & intuitive.
- Combining concentration, practice, organization, focus and discipline with feelings, sense-making and identity development.

References

Bimrose, J., Barnes, S-A., Brown, A. and Hughes, D. (2011). 'The role of career adaptability in skills supply', Wath-upon-Deane: UK Commission for Employment & Skills.

Brown, A., Bimrose, J., Barnes S-A. & Hughes D. (2012) The role of career adaptabilities for mid-career changers, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, Volume 80, Issue 3, pp. 754–761.

Thank you!

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