

# The Role of Learning in Developing Career Adaptability at Work: Evidence from the UK and Norway

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# Career adaptability

## Context

- Changing context for careers practice
- Transitions & life-course perspective

## Research

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

## Findings

- Key findings
- Implications for practice

# Changing Context

❖ Globalisation



❖ Technology



❖ Demography



# Nature of transitions

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



Recovery?

Recession?

Renewal

Growth

Unemployment

Cuts

Inflation

## **UK Commission for Employment & Skills:**

*With 80% of the 2020 workforce already in work, it is clear that we must fix the 'stock' of adult skills as well as the 'flow' of young people into the labour market.*

*Ref: UKCES (2010)*

# 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

## 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

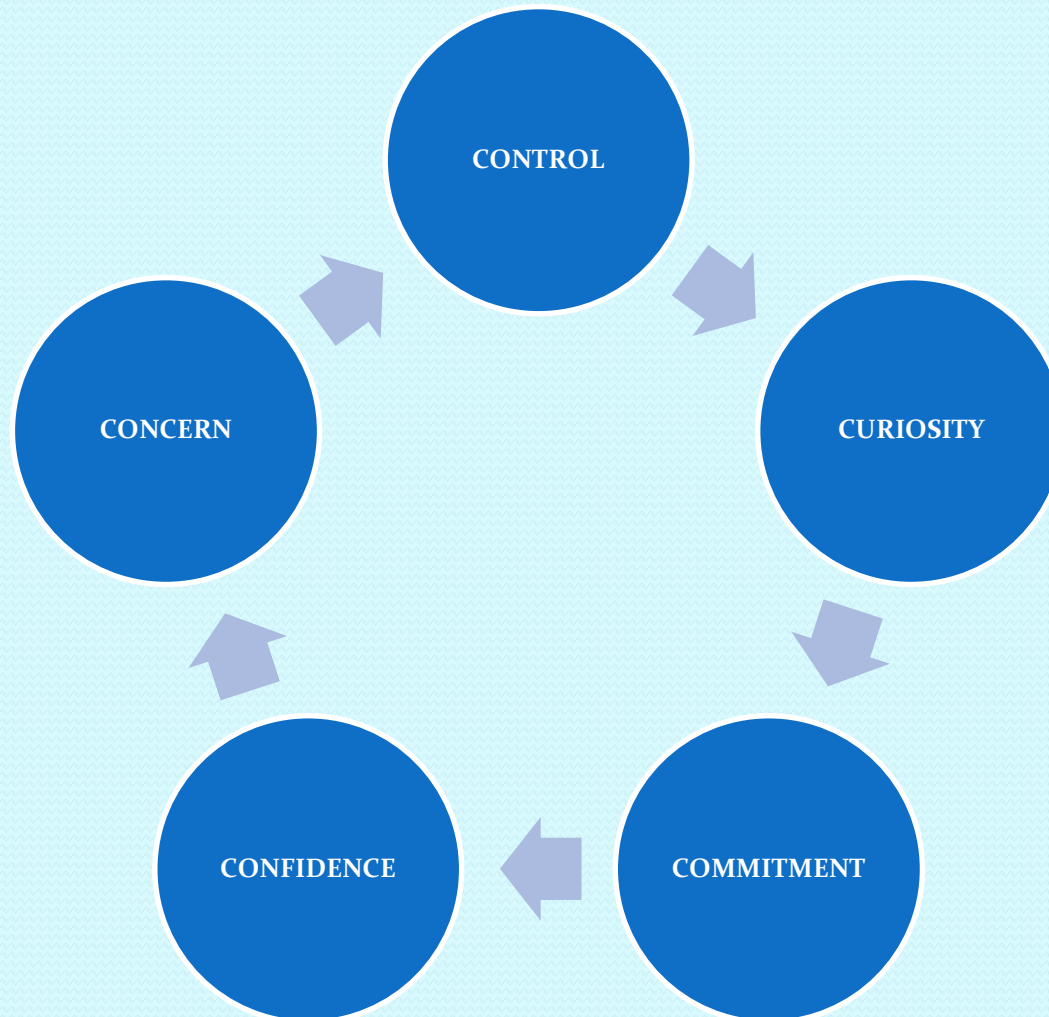
# Research study

- Explicitly qualitative
- 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
- Details of sample in ‘Technical Report’ (online)

# Research aims: career adaptability

- **Examine** role in raising aspirations (higher & lower skill levels)
- **Explore** potential to empower positive decisions & actions
- **Understand** whether it facilitates participation in skill development
- **Investigate** influence of different labour market conditions on its development
- **Consider** value in increasing equitable access to training & learning

# Career Adaptive Competencies



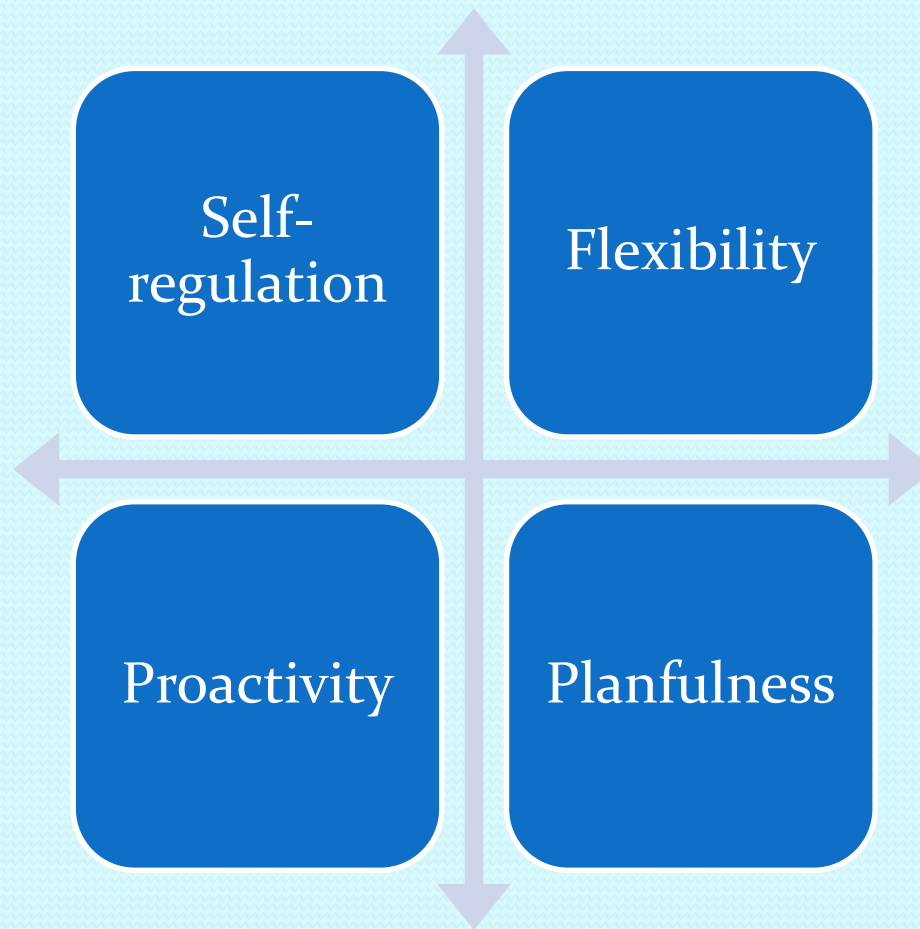
# Career Adaptable Competencies

- **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

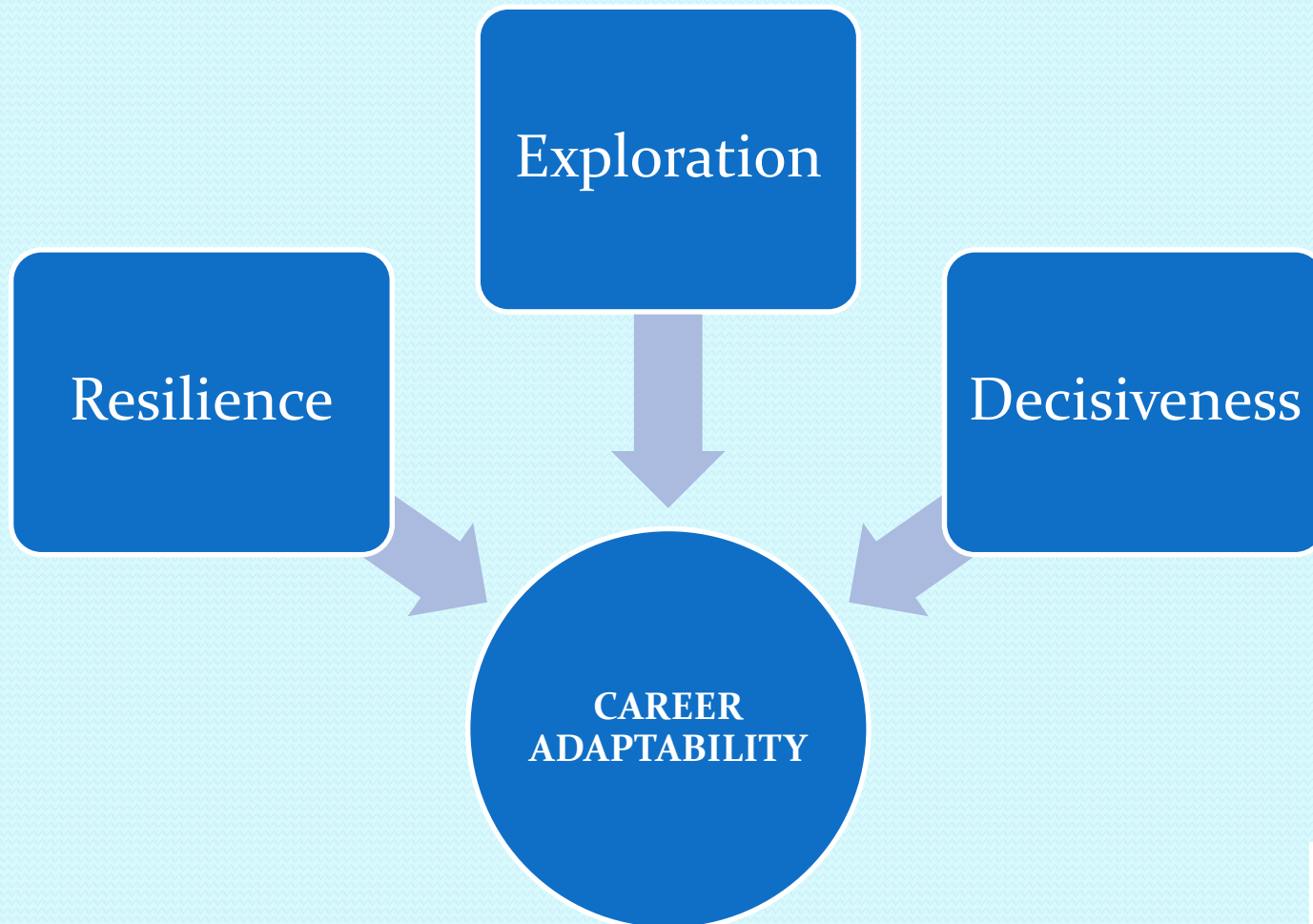
Reference: Savickas et al. (2009). Life designing: A paradigm for career construction in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 75, 3, pp.239-250.



# 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’.
- ‘The feeling of being good at what you do, to master the job – to be able to work purposefully’.
- ‘My learning while working has been enriched with having changed industries. It is healthy to switch jobs. I’m not afraid of changes; 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 through challenging work can help build a platform from which it is possible to adapt 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: necessary to develop a particular way of thinking and practising associated with a discipline, occupation or knowledge base, but then learn in what circumstances not to apply that particular approach.
- Adaptable individuals have learned that 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 know there are other situations, particularly when working in teams or when dealing with clients, customers or patients, when it is inappropriate to approach an issue from a particular perspective learned in the past.

## **Learning to adapt through updating a substantive knowledge base**

- specialist professional qualifications or apprenticeship or other vocational training.
- initial studies relevant in some way 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.

‘I enrolled for a part-time MSc – leaving full time employment to do this’;

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

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

Completed a graduate IPM qualification and then two Masters – one in Industrial Relations and one in coaching.

Holds a degree and 3 Masters degrees. Two of these are science related and the third is an MBA. CPD along the way – ‘never stop learning!’



- formal training often added value to individuals' career development
- but one graduate took a Post Graduate Secretarial Course and regretted the training as 'it took a long time for me to get out of secretarial work'. Fifteen years later she had studied part-time for a Diploma in Management, but it was 'disorganised and not very relevant'.
- Some participants completed integrated training, which comprised formal learning, learning on-the-job and self-directed learning: graduate traineeship
- Health, IT and engineering etc.: on-line courses, professional updating; substantive programmes of learning and development - computer generated imagery; control of infectious diseases; medical imaging science (ultrasound); and materials science (metallurgy).
- 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.'

Individuals were combining processes of sense-making, with re-contextualisation of the development of knowledge and understanding, after intensive periods of knowledge development and application.

Updating formal knowledge was always linked to a range of more informal ways of knowledge development and utilisation.

Search for knowledge could incorporate aspects of technical:

- know-how (how to apply technologies);
- know-what (where and when technologies and knowledge could be applied);
- know-who (including an active search for people who would be valuable as members of a personal network); and
- know-why (a fuller understanding of work processes including, in some cases in health, a deeper scientific understanding) (Lundvall, 2002).

- 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

# 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 for career professionals needs to encourage the use of career narratives and the application of career adaptive competencies
- Duplicating this approach in joint professional training (career professionals, career educators and allied professions) could yield closer co-operation on what works best for clients
- Use of ICT could make career adaptive competencies and how these translate into everyday lives more visible

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
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