



CAREER CRAFT

Career self-management for
professionals

ABSTRACT

This article summarises key aspects of our approach to career self-management. It is relevant to people at any stage of a career, in any work that requires the attainment of defined standards of professional behaviour and technical competence.

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Defining careers and Career Craft

A career is not a problem that needs to be solved.

It is a human phenomenon. Humans are complex. To want and to create a career is paradoxical.¹ It is a ground for much anxiety, and confusion. Career choices that you make are influenced by your own conscious and subconscious assessments of necessity, ability, probability and possibility, throughout your life course.²

Vocational psychology and career psychology have offered many definitions of a 'career'. A definition we like is 'The evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time'.³ Alternatively, you may prefer 'the individual's development in learning and work throughout life'.⁴

Career theory and research has also made much of 'boundaryless' and 'protean' careers in the last few decades.⁵ These concepts are based on the idea that (a) careers are shaped by individuals, not institutions, and (b) careers do not have to be limited to one occupation or an uninterrupted process of constant progress in a straight line. The popularised version of this is the 'squiggly career'.⁶

Our definition of a career is that it is the story you are telling yourself. It is also the story you are telling others. It is the stories that people who know you, or know about you, are also telling, about your working life. These stories reflect who you are, and how you are perceived, throughout your life course.⁷ Your career is therefore a powerful process by which you interface with organisations and the world over time.⁸

Any career has both private and public versions and interpretations.⁹ There are probably versions of your career which compete in your own mind. There are versions you are prepared to communicate to others at different stages of your life, for example, on a social media platform such as LinkedIn. These public and private versions of your career overlap and may also be in conflict.

The version of your career that might exist in other people's minds might surprise you. Different people will look at your career through the lenses of their own experiences and

biases. No version, neither yours nor theirs, is likely to be an exact or true representation purely of facts. Like any biographical data that goes beyond simple chronology and biodata, there will be multiple representations and layers of interpretation by several parties with varying perspectives.

We touched earlier on the paradoxical nature of the human condition, and therefore of careers. Your career is increasingly likely, in the world we are in now, to be a long series of practical and ethical dilemmas. We live in a “post-normal” world, in which there is really no such thing as normality anymore when it comes to human behaviour. Certainly, we as practitioners and authors do not see much “normality” in collective human behaviour. This is a world that is brittle, anxious, non-linear and incomprehensible.

Living in a post-normal world means that the single most important ability required for you to make use of whatever gifts of talent or opportunities you are given, whatever your starting point in life happens to be, is the ability to make your own decisions when dealing with dilemmas. Some dilemmas reflect polarities within your own personality.¹⁰ Your career is going to be like you. If people find you to be self-contradictory, very emotional, or impulsive, or inexplicable at times, then your career might appear to be a bit confused, certainly to those who like simple, logical narratives. If people experience you as quite straightforward and controlled, and predictable as a person, perhaps that will also be true of your career.

People apply their own values to their career choices. How they define career ‘success’ is both subjective and objective.¹¹ It is both an art and a science, which requires awareness of both probability and possibility. There are decades of academic theory and empirical research data about the science of career development and success. These draw on vocational and occupational psychology, which we use extensively in our book, “Career Craft: A Guide to Career Self-Management for Professionals”.

Leading yourself through your life and career is possibly the single most important challenge you will face. Leading others effectively depends on leading yourself.¹²

If you also aspire to be perceived as a leader, rather than purely as a competent technical professional, then you need to start with yourself. This means managing your own career profile, inner development and outward reputation.¹³

In the context of these aspects of careers, we offer our definition of Career Craft.

Career Craft is the effective practice of career self-management. It is a blend of skills, attitudes and behaviours which are required to fulfil personal potential. Career Craft is anchored in a holistic awareness of here-and-now realities, both within oneself and in the environment.

In our book, we delve much more deeply into the various aspects of this definition and its practical implications.

How can Career Craft help you

Career Craft is an integrated and inclusive methodology for how you can craft your own job,¹⁴ manage your career and consequently seek to shape your life. It is a comprehensive skillset, benefitting from proactive behaviour.¹⁵ This can help you to make choices about how to spend your time in pursuit of your personal goals and values. The underlying skills are also steps in a cycle of change.¹⁶ We are aware that most careers require people to develop their ability to manage periods of transition and the accompanying liminality.¹⁷

Professional working lives are iterative and customised by the individual.¹⁸ Modern careers depend on individual choices, attributes and behaviours, in relation to the personal context and the changing situations that individuals face in their own lives.

A career allows you to treat your amalgamated experience like a treasure trove from which you can pick and choose different technical skills and competences to suit your situation. Career choices do not have to be ‘forever’ choices. Career Craft can help make continuous adjustments and choices to move in a direction that aligns with your evolving aspirations.

For instance, a young person who pursues medicine and qualifies as a surgeon, but who no longer wishes to practise medicine may find that they can make use of their knowledge in other ways. They may build on their experience of healthcare by studying business and finance, then joining a healthcare management consultancy, or joining a digital healthcare platform. A professional identity just creates a viable platform.

In making these choices, one also needs to exercise realism. A person who spends their first twenty years in business, who then in their late forties realises that medicine is their 'calling', is very unlikely to be able to build a career in medicine, let alone surgery. While there are transferable knowledge and skills in any profession, there are many practical constraints on individual career choices. Working with these real-world considerations while also making creative lateral use of your skills as you see fit is essential to Career Craft.

In careers that are customised, there is no universal definition of life success and no one right career for you. There is no prize for coming top of the class once you leave school – if indeed you attended that kind of school.

For some people we meet, their career is a 'path to greatness'. However, unless this is self-defined, this can also invite unhealthy comparison¹⁹ and fear of failure.

Status anxiety comes with conformity. It was a foundation of careers in the twentieth century. A status-oriented mindset is built on envy, work addiction and overconsumption.²⁰ Young people entering the workforce are increasingly rejecting a linear, class-driven way of thinking about how and why to live and work in a 'professional society'.²¹ This is not their rejection of professionalism, just a timely and more expansive redefinition. Careers do not have to be like a checklist that is defined by outdated twentieth-century narratives about the role of work in our lives, and the way we should live our lives.

On the other end of the spectrum, you may believe that you must have a purpose.

This might be informed by your psycho-spiritual beliefs, or religious life, or it may be a more practical sense of purpose.

Your purpose may be a narrative about why you exist that makes your life feel worthwhile. Spirituality can be helpful and conducive to mental health.²² However, problems can occur when a work identity becomes conflated with or even replaces religious and spiritual life. Indeed, the corporate happiness and purpose industries have contributed to what Derek Thomson describes as ‘workism’.²³ This is a culture that places too much emphasis on work at the expense of other aspects of life.

In ‘The Happiness Industry’, political economist William Davies argues that the science of happiness is more ideology than science, and an extension of hyper-capitalism.²⁴ We also find that the happy pills sold by ‘wellbeing’, ‘success’, ‘happiness’ and ‘purpose’ industries are all problematic in different ways. These have spawned hundreds of concepts and prescriptions. Some of these are evidence based and do have high validity and utility. However, some extreme versions of positive psychology in workplaces and online can be toxic to mental health.²⁵ Excessive pressure to be positive can be dehumanising and soul-destroying, not life-enhancing.

Thinking that your job, or your work, is necessarily, in and of itself, at the core of happiness, joy or purpose could be counter-productive both professionally and personally. Thinking that your work, or a favourite activity, is a personal or spiritual calling is potentially even delusional.

For example, if you are a music student and you believe music is your calling, the evidence suggests that you could also be less accurate in your perception of your own talent. This could make you less willing to listen to constructive feedback or helpful career advice that runs counter to your beliefs.²⁶ A music teacher or friend who tells you that you may need to consider other paid work rather than pursue music professionally could be wrong. Or they could be trying to save you from yourself. This is where appreciating that a calling and a profession do not always have to be the same can help.

In an ideal world, your work would always be your calling.

We are very far from an ideal world.

Most jobs are created with a business purpose in mind. This might be about business expansion or to satisfy a customer or a social requirement, not purely to satisfy you²⁷ or your motivational or existential needs.

In our own experience, the way that jobs and organisations are designed tends to place people's psychological needs very low down in the list of success criteria. This is despite the wealth of research pointing to the importance of job design for people to perform well. Organisations are not necessarily all designed or managed in a way which ensures people are doing meaningful work or feel a sense of belonging.²⁸ Depending on who you are, it is anyway not always possible for you to feel any heightened emotional, existential or spiritual connection with your work.²⁹

Starting with the more addressable question 'Why do I wish to pursue *this work right now?*' is important and constructive. But that is frequently conflated by workplace coaches and consultants with the question 'Why do I exist as a person?' This is, psycho-spiritually, a deeply difficult, challenging line of enquiry. It can lead people to put far too much pressure on their working identities.

If we keep work in perspective, that is when we can start to get real about how to manage our careers. If you love your work, awesome. We do too – sometimes. It is also okay to just get through your working day and be good at it. You do not have to turn your passion into a career. You do not have to be passionate about work to have a very enjoyable, interesting, satisfying and productive enough career.

It may be possible for you to pursue your passion in a 'second act'³⁰ later in life, or as you go along, as part of your career portfolio. You can do this without jeopardising your financial wellbeing.

The meaning of your life and point of work might only emerge very gradually, like an old-fashioned photograph which takes time and patience to develop. You may find clarity after decades of trial and error, in a life which is itself a series of experiments. The extent to which any work does contribute to a search for meaning depends on how skilfully the individual interprets and responds to the facts of their own situation every hour of each day, throughout working life.

Career Craft is an orientation towards existential uncertainties which accepts reality while rejecting total cynicism, pessimism or individual defeatism. When you read our book, you will see how an approach which is both strategic and pragmatic, both existentially aware and situationally responsive, can help you build your career.

The five dimensions of Career Craft

The five dimensions of Career Craft are interconnected and interdependent. Despite looking separate on paper, in practice they are very synergistic and interwoven.

In developing this framework, we have built on and repurposed a psychological coaching framework that we have used for performance coaching and leadership development in organisations for over a decade.³¹ This work has helped dozens of organisations develop their agility and health in the face of a hyper-competitive, uncertain business environment. Our work uses a model of leadership agility which is described in detail in our previous books.

Career Craft is, essentially, a way to exercise *self-leadership in a career context*. There are natural overlaps and connections with other areas of work psychology, such as performance coaching, leadership development and organisation design. In repurposing and further developing our model for leadership and organisational agility, so that it can be applied to personal career development, we have added a fifth dimension. This dimension is adjustment.

Here, we will provide separate descriptions for each dimension. However, they are interactive in the way they support career development. You can start anywhere in the cycle. You can move anywhere within the cycle at any time in your own approach to Career Craft. An overarching career cycle takes shape over many smaller cyclical iterations over many years, even decades.

In certain situations, it may be that the priority is to build a network of allies. Your allies may act as a sounding board so that you can start to gain more clarity on realistic aspirations for your career.

Or you may find that just trying something new is the only way you can get unstuck from a situation and gain a different perspective. Goals and aspirations are sometimes very unclear. Your career goals can be hard to pin down at the first attempt, or even for many years. Do not let a lack of complete clarity stop you from using Career Craft to develop yourself and improve your situation.

Aspiration

You benefit from being able to visualise what you want from your career, in the short, medium and long term.³² There may be more than one possible picture of these aspirations. These aspirations can evolve. It is possible that you can envision many possible future selves.³³

Each different version of your future represents a different use of your strengths and abilities. Developing a range of options and scenarios is a productive way to start to think about the paths available to you. It is also possible that the way you prefer to approach your own career, especially when you want to make a career change, is by exploring different types of work. You can do this in practical ways by learning from real-world exposure and experience.³⁴

The model we are presenting here is not designed to be linear. You can start with action ('Activate'), learn from the experience and then come back to what your aspirations might realistically be. Aspirations can change based on what you learn as you move forwards. They can be rough mental sketches. They do not need to be very granular or detailed.

Alignment

You are unlikely to get the work you need or aspire to have if you do not have the right connections to the right people. Your ability to create your network of allies and build a positive reputation with them is going to be a key asset for you. This will help in your pursuit of pretty much any aspiration. Everyone, regardless of occupation and educational level, benefits from career allies.³⁵

How you find these allies, cultivate relationships with them and gain their interest in your aspirations can transform your career prospects and therefore your life. Whatever your

personality preferences, even if you are very strongly introverted or private, there will be times when you will need to make your aspirations clear to others. We have heard stories of many people who have created career allies and discovered life-changing opportunities in non-obvious ways: chatting to people in airport lounges; striking up a conversation in a coffee shop close to a workplace; at social gatherings outside work.

Selling yourself does not mean being overbearing, selling out or selling your soul. You do not need to be a ruthless self-promoter who spends their time plotting how to get people's attention. That would be counterproductive.

Chance meetings and serendipity can work, and it helps to be alive to possibilities. However, allies are more likely to be quite specific and targeted connections who know you. These are people who have worked with you. They know what you can do. These people know you well enough to recommend you to a few other connections, within specific fields of work. Just this simple process can support your professional development. A well-managed warm network will increase your chances of making the career progress that you want. In our book we share much more advice about how you can build effective networks.

Activation

Putting your aspirations into action requires mobilisation of your developmental network.³⁶ This requires the courage and persuasive skill to generate action on your behalf.

If some kind of career progress is what you seek, then any assumption or promise that an employer will engineer that progress for you might need to be tested. This is not an invitation to start making career changes or changes of employer in ways that might undermine your reputation.

What you will find, however, is that if you do not ask, you will not get. If you do not look out for specific types of opportunities, then they will be invisible to you.³⁷ Career opportunities can be like cars. On a very busy road, all the cars can merge into one

amorphous sea of traffic. However, a make and model of car that you also drive, or a car that you wish you drove, will jump out at you. You will not miss it.

The need for a strong personal brand applies both to internal and external career development and job seeking. The ability to build a profile, and seek and seize opportunities, matters for internal progression towards more senior roles within an existing organisation³⁸, as much as it matters for those seeking to change employer or career.

If you are in a decent-enough workplace, the people who run it or own it might have ideas for your career development. They might even be able to create amazing opportunities for you. Even so, your internal stakeholders will still expect you to take some ownership for planning and managing your own career.³⁹ There are exceptions for those who join structured programmes of career development in certain professions or industries. Their roles may largely be determined by the organisation, at least in the early years.

If you are the beneficiary of structured programmes of career development, you will need to be prepared to make career moves. Sometimes, this might also require geographic moves. Most organisations now try to accommodate employees' preferences and career interests. However, employee flexibility to learn the skills and take on work which matters to the organisation is associated with high-performing employees.⁴⁰

Adjustment

Career Craft is learnt through trial and error.

Regular course corrections, with less frequent major changes of speed and direction, may be required during your working life. This process of learning from experience is to some extent also a process of learning how to learn. Learning how to learn in the context of creating a career for yourself means learning how to be 'reflexive'.⁴¹

Reflexivity is the ability to look at oneself in action. This helps you develop an additional layer of awareness about your impact. You start to notice the antecedents and possible consequences of your patterns of behaviour. The ability to be reflexive is an in-the-moment process of self-exploration and creative adjustment.⁴² This is a term used in

Gestalt psychotherapy. Creative adjustment is all about constant realignment to the demands of one's situation. It means you stay open to shifting your mindset towards your perceived reality.

Adjustment to emerging reality is a spontaneous process. It is not always easy or just a straightforward calculation. Adjusting to your changing circumstances and challenges is unlikely to equate to obvious choices between a right way forward and a wrong way forward for you.

More likely, you will make ethical and practical trade-offs. This may be between scenarios which all seem on the surface like they are not ideal.⁴³ The absence of any path that conforms to an ideal scenario in most people's careers is one of the reasons Career Craft is important.

Achievement

You will bring aspirations to life, and fulfil your potential, one step at a time. You can do this with measurable and visible staging posts.

'Self-actualisation' has long been the holy grail of humanistic psychology, as enshrined in Maslow's hierarchy of needs.⁴⁴ The empirical evidence for such a motivational hierarchy is limited. The role of a hierarchy of needs in shaping human experience and psychological wellbeing is unfortunately unproven. But it remains an influential concept.

The kind of achievement we are referring to is more closely connected to actualisation in relation to the aspirations that you have for yourself. This is not necessarily the kind of self-actualisation envisioned by humanistic or positive psychology. However, depending on your own circumstances and priorities, it could include an elevated sense of wellbeing. It does imply basic life satisfaction.

You might think about aspiration through the lens of financial reward. Then your achievements will be about income and wealth creation. If you tend to look at aspiration through the lens of helping others, then your achievements might involve some form of public service or charitable work. You might be inclined to work towards both financial

and philanthropic or other altruistic aspirations at the same time. You may not want to prioritise one over the other.

Career Craft is not a morally prescriptive methodology. However, we do suggest that anyone who truly is skilled at managing their careers is also mindful of their impact.

Business and career ethics are challenging terrain. Our ethical position is that Career Craft requires minimal harm while pursuing goals that are not only legal but also reasonably sustainable. While we do not want to be prescriptive, we also do not want to operate in an ethical vacuum. This would imply Career Craft is completely amoral. We think of sustainability in an ethical, social and ecological sense. The underlying spirit and essence of the United Nation's sustainable development goals inform this ethical foundation.⁴⁵ The world may not be moving towards these goals very effectively. Collective global goals of this kind are in fact evaporating in the current geopolitical environment. However, in the absence of any other framework, sustainable development goals serve as reminders that personal and collective achievement can be compatible.

Conclusion

Walt Whitman's profound and moving poem 'Song of Myself', first published in 1855, asks, 'Do I contradict myself?' and the reply is 'Very well then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes'.⁴⁶

Like Whitman, can you accept that you cannot be boiled down to this or that 'type of person'? Why approach yourself and therefore your career in just one way?

This brings us full circle, back to our opening message about the paradoxical nature of people and careers. You are more than capable of surprising yourself. At times, you will surprise people around you as you work your way through life.

Your unique, and, perhaps contradictory, personality will show up in the ways in which you make use of yourself, on this amazing planet. You will do this for whatever time you happen to be granted. Career Craft requires you to learn about your contradictions and use them well. It is a blend of skills, attitudes and behaviours which are required to fulfil personal potential.

Some career theories are anchored in linear theories of life stages within human development.⁴⁷ It is unhelpful to think about stages of life in stereotypical, simplistic ways. Careers in many sectors of the economy, in a rapidly changing digital context, are becoming more like mosaics of experience rather than demarcated paths that we all follow throughout life.⁴⁸ These mosaics are personal and take shape over time.

The pattern or story might only be clear in retrospect once the mosaic is substantive. You might sense the patterns as you go along and amplify aspects that feel productive. You might want to change something you are doing to change the emerging pattern of your mosaic. This mosaic metaphor might even apply to those who can and do choose to build a career primarily with one or two organisations. You might find that as you build a career within sprawling human ecosystems, you are also creating your own mosaic.⁴⁹

The five A's – Aspiration, Alignment, Activation, Adjustment and Achievement – are all building blocks of career development throughout the healthy life span. These building blocks all contribute to your own ability to manage the increasing uncertainty we as a species are creating for ourselves. The cognitive and behavioural characteristics of each of these dimensions of Career Craft, and how you can develop the requisite competences are explored in much more detail in our book.

Your successful adoption of Career Craft will depend on your ability not just to cope with what might feel like a surreal and deeply unsettling external reality, but also to use it for the construction of what will become your own career mosaic.

To learn more about the specific things you or your organisation can do to grow Career Craft, please contact us. For a start, you can of course read our book. Offering practical insights, case studies and suggested reflection exercises, we hope you will find it a useful guide to developing self-awareness and lifelong confidence at career self-management.

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Kiran is a work psychologist and the author of two previous books, which were focused on change, leadership and organisational agility. He has worked across sectors, living and working in Europe, the Middle East and Asia Pacific. Kiran is a graduate of Oxford University in experimental psychology, and a postgraduate of the Manchester School of Management in organisational psychology. He also holds a doctorate in psychotherapy from the Metanoia Institute in London. He is an Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society, has accreditation in coaching psychology from the International Society for Coaching Psychology. Kiran enjoys poetry, music, theatre and mountains.

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