

# The importance of career adaptability

By *Alison Maitland*

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Compare these different approaches to career transitions. After 20 years in professional practice as an accountant, Brian had moved into industry, and then into the non-profit sector. “Change is fun, exciting and you should embrace it and not be scared of it,” he said. “You've got to constantly refresh and reinvent yourself.”

Carol had tailored her career to her changing personal circumstances over the years, including taking a career break. “I thought, 'What are the roads open to me?' and then I just scored them in my mind. What would I be able to do? The one that came out highest was the one I went with. And I've tended to do things that weren't a high risk.”

These cases (names changed for anonymity) are described in newly published [research](#)\* on the importance of adaptability in career fulfilment. Both Brian and Carol had been through ups and downs in their careers, and of course their circumstances were different. But Brian was looking to the future with optimism and a readiness to adapt, while Carol felt frustrated and alienated from her chosen profession despite being successful in a new line of work, and she lacked confidence in her ability to address this situation.

Hilary Lindsay, author of the research and vice president of ICAEW (the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales), explains: “Some interviewees had responded proactively to whatever transpired throughout their careers and were pleased with the careers they had enjoyed, while others felt events had conspired against them.”

Given the way that work and careers are changing, her findings and lessons for lifelong learning are timely. Increasing longevity means that many of us will choose or be forced to keep working for longer. People will switch jobs or careers more often, move between employment and self-employment, and take breaks to study or to care for children and elderly relatives. Technology will wipe out swaths of jobs while creating others, requiring us to stay nimble in learning new skills.

Career adaptability is not a nice thing to have - it is becoming essential. But what exactly is it, and can you acquire it? Building on earlier research on the dimensions of learning, Hilary sets out five attributes of career adaptability:

**Engaging** – interacting with others and with the environment to seek to influence the future

**Exploring** – finding out what is happening out there in order to see whether it might be relevant

**Experimenting** – being prepared to try out new ideas

**Positive attitude** – being optimistic about the future

**Self-belief** – having confidence in yourself and your ability

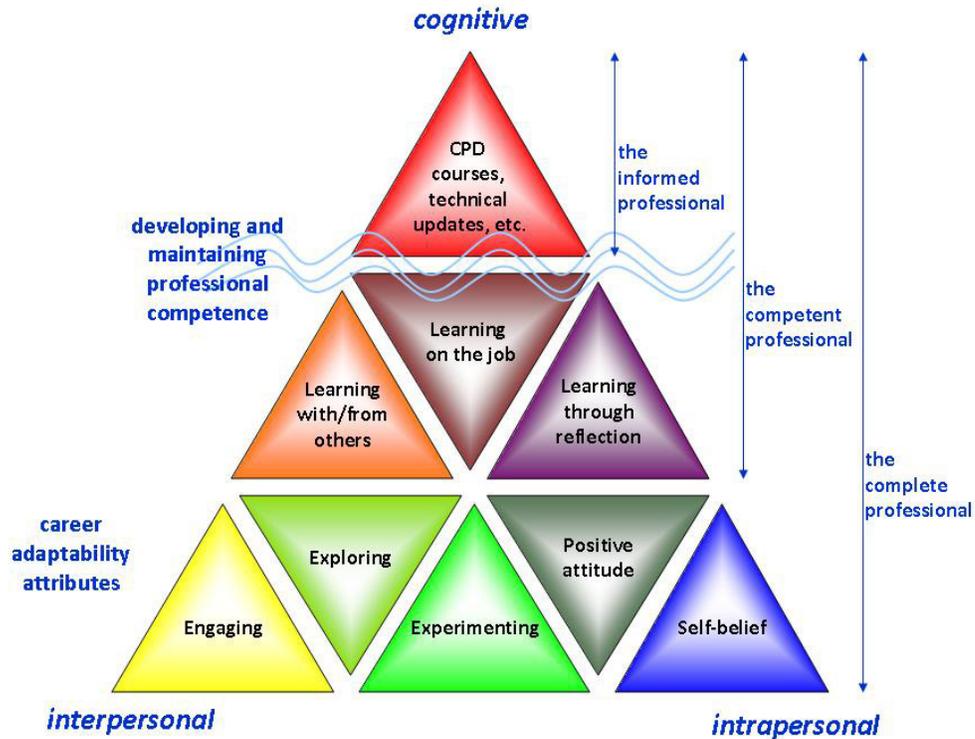
She places these attributes on a spectrum, with “interpersonal” skills such as engaging with others, at one end, and intrapersonal skills, such as self-belief, at the other. (Interpersonal and intrapersonal are two of the three recognised dimensions of learning, the third one being “cognitive”, for example learning skills and gaining knowledge by going to workshops or doing online training.)

An example of “engaging” and “exploring” is the willingness to go out and meet new people and then to follow up on what one discovers in these meetings. As it happens, I met Hilary at a women's network dinner, at which our host had thoughtfully placed us next to each other, knowing of our mutual interests. When Hilary outlined the traits of adaptability to me, they struck a chord. Her research is based on the accountancy profession, but it seemed to me to be relevant to professionals in any field – and closely linked to my own interest in how work is changing.

Hilary's own experience of career adaptability has fuelled her enthusiasm for helping others to understand and acquire it. She began in accountancy in a practice in northwest England, started her own practice, left accountancy to work for the Open University, and now combines her ICAEW role with research and lecturing. She is only the second woman to be appointed as ICAEW vice-president – and she will be nominated president next year.

She found that the cognitive dimension of learning – training courses and technical updates – were what came to mind when accountants were asked about “continuing professional development”. The other dimensions of learning seemed not to register. But they are just as important, she argues.

“While learning relating to professional competence will result in the 'competent professional', adding the second element of learning relating to career adaptability will lead to the 'complete professional', a competent professional who is being adaptable in order to have the future they want.” The graphic below, which comes from her book, illustrates the different elements of learning that make up this complete professional.



Source: *Adaptability - The Secret to Lifelong Learning*, by Hilary Lindsay

What happens if you don't have this adaptability – if you lack self-confidence or optimism, or if you find it a struggle to experiment with new things? Essentially, the answer is to work on these in the same way as you would work on gaining technical expertise or knowledge to progress in your career. Consider strategic networking to be part of your continuing professional development, for example, and keep your future career aspirations in mind when doing so.

I think employers could also do more to support their employees in gaining career adaptability – starting by recognizing its importance. “Not only are the five attributes ones that will help individuals pursue the life patterns and career lines they choose,” says Hilary. “They are also attributes that will make individuals more effective in their professional roles.”

\**Adaptability: The Secret to Lifelong Learning*, by Hilary Lindsay. Published by Professional Associations Research Network <http://www.parnglobal.com/publications/cpd/adaptability-the-secret-to-lifelong-learning>

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