

# CAREER CAPITAL: BUILDING OUR MOBILITY WITHIN AN EVOLVING WORLD OF WORK



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Working for longer is a notion featuring more frequently within our day-to-day conversations with clients. Imagining working until later in life can potentially lead to questions such as: What will I do for all of that time? How will I sustain my work over several decades? It is conceivable that our clients will face a number of chapters within their working life. As well as working across a range of different roles and organisations, they may even consider changing professions.

Transitions are becoming more complex. They can take on different forms, including: movement within or between businesses, voluntary or involuntary, within or between functions, side-wards, upwards or downwards. Such variation in forms creates unique challenges for our clients to contend with.

Such work changes lead to transitions, whether these involve moving between roles, organisations or occupations. Perhaps transitions are therefore an increasingly frequent part of our working lives. A transition can be defined as the internal psychological reorientation that we go through when we experience an external change (Bridges, 1980), such as a role change. Given that it is likely that our clients will be moving more frequently through their working lives, being able to manage transitions is an important practice to master, and for us to support.

Transitions can be stressful (Baruch, 2006), and we know that change can be difficult for many. Not only are there external changes to contend with, including forging new relationships, cultivating new life habits and developing new skills, but there are also internal changes that occur. There may be a need for our clients to change career narrative – or in other words their career story - to stay content in and to bring meaning to new roles, alter how they see themselves (i.e. their identity), and they may also need to update their perceptions of career success.

Over the past 20 years, as a consultant and business owner, I (Cathy) have worked with clients to support them to undertake transitions and change. Given that it is an area that I am passionate about, I decided to embark on a PhD study to explore how we can undertake role transitions more easily, enabling our clients to be more mobile. This article shares some of these interim findings and introduces the notion of career capital as a more elaborate approach to thinking about personal resources, or in other words, personal capabilities and networks.

## Career capital

Given the inherent challenges of role transitions just seen, we may readily ask ourselves: ‘what career resources can help my clients within this transition?’ Within career development, we have been equipped with a range of resources (mainly competency- and skills-based). Competency-based approaches have encouraged a rather narrow view of career resources needed to transition. In contrast, career capital views career resources with greater sophistication and acknowledges their connectedness.

One definition of career capital can be described as, ‘the overall set of non-financial resources a person is able to bring to his or her work’ (Arthur, DeFillippi and Jones, 2001: 101). DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) characterised career capital into three ‘knowings’:

- Knowing-Why
- Knowing-How
- Knowing-Whom

Since this time, the concept has been used sporadically within careers research and practice. (See Figure 1)

- Knowing-Why includes knowing beliefs, values, purpose and interests and shapes our motivation;
- Knowing-How comprises occupational knowledge, expertise and skills;
- Knowing-Whom denotes networks and interpersonal relationships that support contacts, learning and reputation.

Limited research to date suggests that these ‘knowings’, are synergistic, and that when used together support role holders to better manage their careers (Lamb and Sutherland, 2010).

## Benefits of career capital

As compared to other ways of defining personal resources, career capital has many benefits: It has a broad scope since it looks at psychological resources (e.g. values), as well as practical resources (e.g. networks); It takes account of different contexts and it is possible to define the career capital requirements to transition into and excel in different roles and also different organisations; By being built on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of capital (Bourdieu, 1986), which includes our social networks and family resources, it has theoretical rigour; It recognises the developmental multiplier effect, where developing career capital can in itself develop more career capital. For example, your client’s colleague



Figure 1: Representation of DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) (Source: Authors' own)

(Knowing-Whom) may help to build their own self-confidence (Knowing-Why); Finally, it acknowledges market dynamics by recognising that some career capital aspects may become obsolete (e.g. specific technical skills) whereas others may gain value (Tempest and Coupland, 2016) (e.g. innovation).

Consequently, career capital can help mobility between roles, organisations and professions. We can work with our clients to research and define those career capital aspects that can be transported between different settings, as opposed to them being relevant within just one organisational setting. This means that we can focus our attention on those aspects that are transferrable, enabling our clients to move more easily into different work settings.

Career capital can be used to encourage future-focus; it encourages a consciousness of our clients' aspirations and the emerging aspects of career capital relevant to these career destinations.

How can we, as career practitioners, support our clients to remain mobile amid the changing and challenging career contexts? We can help our clients to build their personal mobility within the world of work, by:

- Helping our clients to understand their career aspirations, future work areas and the predicted career capital that will be of increasing value in that area;
- Supporting our clients to assess their current career capital portfolio and work out a development plan to plug any gaps;
- Helping clients to realise their short, medium and longer term aspirations.

#### Tips for career practitioners

We need to consider how we support our clients to prepare to undertake transitions at work and to build their mobility through developing their career capital. This may include:

- Taking time to become more familiar with the notion of transitions and their different forms
- Helping clients to deconstruct up-and-coming transitions and to identify the dimensions at play and anticipate what this means in terms of levels of

challenge

- Reading up and becoming more familiar and comfortable with the notion of career capital
- Finding ways of helping clients to assess their current career capital aspects;
- Working with clients to identify their short, medium and long term aspirations and help to develop their up-and-coming career capital within these particular fields.

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