

## Chapter 2

# Career Adaptability: Changing Self and Situation for Satisfaction and Success

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*The meta-competencies [of identity and adaptability] give individuals a sense of when it is time to change and the capacity to change.*

M. L. Savickas (2011, p. 11).

**Abstract** Human beings must adapt to survive and thrive across all domains of life. Doing so in the work domain requires career adaptability—the particular capacity to hone and use psychosocial resources necessary to make changes in self and situation for career satisfaction and success. Rooted in life-span, life-space theory, the career adaptability construct has evolved both conceptually and practically since it was first introduced nearly 40 years ago. Career adaptability now represents a principal construct for comprehending vocational behavior and a focus of interventions to foster life-career design. As a meta-competency for effective career construction and life design, career adaptability today offers a cross-nationally valid and vital conceptual and practical frame for assisting individuals to manage their careers within changing world and local economies and job markets. The present chapter traces the origins and evolution of career adaptability as a psychological construct and discusses its significance for career studies and intervention. Career adaptability fits the contemporary landscape of careers as a focus for theory and practice to assist individuals to build resilience; change self and circumstances in relation to fluctuating career contexts; and successfully navigate career development tasks, career transitions, and work-based traumas.

**Keywords** Career adaptability • Career maturity • Career construction  
Life-span/life-space theory • Life design

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K. Maree (ed.), *Psychology of Career Adaptability, Employability and Resilience*,  
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-66954-0\_2

## Introduction

Human life-careers require adaptability, the capacity to make changes in self and situation for satisfaction and success (Brown & Lent, 2016; Morrison & Hall, 2002; Santilli, Marcionetti, Rochat, Rossier, & Nota, 2016; Savickas, 1997, 2013; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; Super & Knasel, 1981; Vondracek, Ford, & Porfeli, 2014). Individuals must continuously adapt throughout the life course to respond effectively to changing personal needs and environmental demands and opportunities in order to remain productive, purposeful, and gainfully employed. Recognizing this fact, careers scholars and practitioners around the world today advance career adaptability, particularly within the life-designing paradigm (Savickas et al., 2009) and through narrative practice methods (Maree, 2015), as a cardinal construct useful for understanding vocational behavior and for designing interventions to assist individuals to make changes in self and situation so that they can navigate work and workplaces, increase their employability, and promote self-regulatory cognitions, emotions, behaviors, and attitudes essential for career satisfaction and success (e.g., de Guzman & Choi, 2013; Glavin, 2015; Hamtiaux, Houssemand, & Vrignaud, 2013; Hirschi, Hermann, & Keller, 2015; Rossier, 2015; Savickas et al., 2009).

Career adaptability first emerged as a construct within life-span, life-space theory (Super, 1990; Super & Knasel, 1981). This proved a response to the insufficiency of the career maturity construct, apropos adolescent vocational development, to explain adult career-stage development. Subsequent empirical and conceptual work over the past 20 years has effectively advanced career adaptability in place of career maturity. This work has done so because adaptability has evolved both conceptually and practically as a meta-competency for effective career construction and life design (Morrison & Hall, 2002; Rossier, 2015; Savickas, 1997, 2012b, 2013; Savickas et al., 2009). As a meta-competency alongside identity, denoting intrapsychic clarity about self-in-role (Hartung & Taber, 2015; McAdams, 2001; Savickas, 2011), career adaptability involves the psychosocial capacity and skills to make changes in self and situations needed for managing tasks, transitions, and traumas associated with career exploration, career choice, and work adjustment.

Organizations and workplaces in constant flux offer little security. Meanwhile, the timing of roles and the normative role sequence from child to spouse to parent to grandparent and from student to worker to retiree has given way to a wide variety of life and career pathways. The increasing variability in role sequence and timing suggests that a stable vocational identity may hinder favorable functioning (Vondracek & Porfeli, 2011). Scholars and practitioners alike have therefore advanced adaptability as critical for dealing with ongoing career change and transformation. In an uncertain and unstable world, individuals must now turn inward through self-reflection and skill development to promote their own career adaptability and thereby effectively self-regulate, build resilience, and increase their employability.

As evidenced sharply within the chapters of the present volume, career adaptability now offers a cross-nationally valid and vital conceptual and practical frame

for assisting individuals to manage their careers within changing world and local economies and job markets. This is due in large part to a wealth of literature that has accumulated to map the conceptual network and measurement of the construct (Rossier, 2015; Savickas, 2013; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). This literature has grown especially within the past ten years spawned by the work of concerted international collaborations (see for example Rossier, 2015; Savickas et al., 2009; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Setting the stage for the volume, the present chapter traces the origins and development of career adaptability as a psychological construct and discusses its significance for career theory and intervention.

## Career Adaptability Through Three Paradigms

The focus of career counseling and development has shifted along with the changing landscape of the world of work (Pope, 2015) and changes in the very notion of career itself; (Collin & Young, 2000; Inkson, Dries, & Arnold, 2015). Theories and conceptualizations of career choice and development that arose during the 20th century responded to the needs of traditional career trajectories. These theories and their corresponding practice methods fit within two principal 20th-century traditions of person-environment fit and life-span development. Subsequently, a third career theory and practice tradition of life-designing emerged in early 21st-century to better respond to the realities of the digital and global age wherein individuals often feel uncertain and uneasy in the face of a work world that frequently offers little in the way of stability and security (Nota & Rossier, 2015; Savickas, 2012a, b; Savickas, et al., 2009).

Career adaptability first emerged within the developmental career tradition as a construct to construe and advance adult career development in a way that would augment career maturity as a construct that applied to career development processes during adolescence (Savickas, 1997; Super & Knasel, 1981). More recently, career adaptability has effectively replaced career maturity as a construct for conceptualizing coping resources for making changes in self and situation to effectively manage a life-career. Indeed, with the advent of the life-designing paradigm, career adaptability has evolved as a cardinal construct and central goal for life-career satisfaction and success (Savickas et al., 2009). Seeds of the adaptability construct can also be found in the person-environment fit tradition.

***P-E fit: Adapting to fit self to work environments.*** The differential psychology of person-environment (P-E) fit and occupational choice (e.g., Holland, 1997; Parsons, 1909) followed a model of career that assumed a linear-hierarchical progression. Most workers were assumed to track a set path from school to work and move, metaphorically speaking, up a career ladder to positions of increasing achievement and responsibility within an organization (Inkson, Dries, & Arnold, 2015). In turn, career counseling practice followed suit by providing vocational guidance services to match people to occupations (Savickas, 2015). Vocational guidance practices are subsumed under theories that focus on individual differences

within the P-E fit paradigm. Along with the Theory of Work Adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984), the Theory of Vocational Personalities and Work Environments (Holland, 1997) stands as an exemplar of the P-E fit paradigm. Holland posited six personality types called Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, Conventional (RIASEC) that comprised individuals' corresponding vocational interests, capacities, work values, and personality traits. These six types also fit work and educational environments such that knowing the dominant and sub-dominant traits of individuals' vocational personalities, counselors could help clients to match themselves to occupations that best suit their personalities. Within the RIASEC model, Holland (1997) linked a heightened sense of personality-type clarity in the form of vocational identity directly to a greater capacity to adapt self to and make changes in corresponding work environments. Recent research implicates career adaptability as a dynamic mechanism affecting links between dispositional personality traits and career adapting behavior (Nilforooshan & Salimi, 2016). Positive psychological traits involved with hope, optimism, and resilience also show relationships with career adaptability (Buyukgoze-Kavas, 2016).

***Life-span development: Adapting to meet developmental tasks.*** Although theories like Holland's in the P-E fit psychology tradition aptly answered the question of *what* occupation matches an individual's unique personality, they did not answer the question of *how* individuals progress in their occupational roles. Responding to this problem, Super (1957) proposed a developmental theory of vocational behavior and launched the psychology of careers. In so doing, the focus for career theory and intervention accommodated to also attending to how individuals cope with the development of their careers and the tasks that correspond to their advancement in occupational roles.

A core construct within Super's (1955) model was termed *career maturity* and denoted readiness of an individual during adolescence to adjust to the demands of social roles including the role of worker. Progress in vocational development during adolescence was conceived to involve increasing an individual's level of career maturity, or choice readiness by dealing with career exploration-stage tasks in both attitudinal and cognitive domains (Savickas, 1997; Super, 1974; Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996; Thompson, Lindeman, Super, Jordaan, & Myers, 1984). Successful coping in the attitudinal domain means that adolescents develop firm beliefs about the importance of planning their vocational futures and exploring the world of work, and that they initiate behaviors to realize those beliefs (Crites, 1971; Thompson, Lindeman, Super, Jordaan, & Myers, 1984). In the cognitive domain, successful exploration-stage task coping means that adolescents acquire and use knowledge about the content and process of career decision making and about the world of work to make informed and effective educational and vocational decisions (Crites, 1971; Thompson et al., 1984; Westbrook, Elrod, & Wynne, 1996). As will be discussed below, career adaptability eventually emerged as a construct within life-span, life-space theory because career maturity did not adequately capture adult career development processes (Knasel & Super, 1981).

Super's theory enhancement incorporated individual differences and explained, through social role theory, how individuals develop throughout their life-careers

and correspondingly make career decisions. The evolution of the theory is evident in Super's first naming the theory "Career Development Theory," then "Developmental Self-Concept Theory," and ultimately "Life-Span, Life-Space Theory" (Hartung, 2013; Savickas, 1997). Functionalism provided the organizing principle undergirding Super's theory-building work. From the traditions of Dewey (1886) and Woodworth (1938), functionalism concerns the questions, "What do people do?" and "Why do they do it?" Functionalism was the precursor of psychological thought and in mid-20th century was largely supplanted by behaviorism as the dominant psychological paradigm.

Super's construction of a developmental career theory was influenced by his preference for functionalism and it is apparent in the structure of his theories (Savickas, 1997). The emergence of life roles in Super's theory moved career theory away from a unidimensional understanding of individuals toward a multi-faceted view that included adapting self and situation to roles in home, school, work, and community. This shift not only fit with a post-industrial era, but also began a move away from functionalism toward a post-modern approach to understanding the vocational self in multiple contexts. Super's (1954) work to develop the Thematic-Extrapolation Method (TEM) and the pioneering, if not at the time widely accepted work of David Tiedeman (1961) moved beyond positivist, trait-factor conceptions of career to advance constructivist and social constructionist perspectives. In developing the TEM, Super produced the first narrative career intervention focused on life themes to promote career choice and development. The TEM combined career pattern and life history data in a chronological sequence that permitted identifying and interpreting recurring themes in an individual life-career story (Jepsen, 1994).

Like Super, Tiedeman (1961) found the models and methods of differential career psychology ineffective in capturing the rich complexity and subjective nature of human life-careers. He therefore devised a career process model that incorporated concepts such as reflective career consciousness and career constructionism to explain career as an ongoing, unfolding, evolving process of growth and change requiring individual adaptability. Tiedeman proposed that individuals act with purpose to anticipate, implement, differentiate, and reintegrate their experiences to define their own personal realities and bring continuity to their life-careers. In so doing they inscribe their careers with meaning. Because he believed career embodied life, Tiedeman proposed that both satisfaction and success derive from engaging in work commensurate with one's own personal meaning system, much like shaping a narrative and adapting in ways that allow one to become more complete and whole (Maree, 2007).

Through their work, both Super and Tiedeman set the stage for an eventual rise of narrative and psychological constructivist and social constructionist approaches to career theory and intervention that occurred in full by the early 1990s. Career adaptability represents a central construct for comprehending and shaping careers within these approaches.

Super's integration of self, and the added component of life-roles in his final statement of life-span, life-space theory (Super, 1990) made a significant

contribution to understanding the self in vocational behavior and in ways distinct from sociological and other psychological theories. Super's work provided the foundation for setting the course of the career adaptability construct that he proposed fosters development as individuals cycle and recycle through five career stages over the life-span. These developmental periods demarcate the stages of a career beginning in childhood with the stage of growth, continuing during adolescence with exploration, then career establishment during emerging adulthood, middle-adult career maintenance, and late-adult career disengagement (Hartung, 2013). Each career stage presents discernible developmental tasks in the form of substages that entail a primary adaptive goal related to self-concept development. The prime task during growth is to adapt through initial self-concept formation. Adolescence presents need to adapt by initially implementing one's self-concept in trial occupational roles, such as part-time employment. Test of an online career intervention with middle-school students showed significant increases in career adaptability among this age group (Nota, Santilli, & Soresi, 2016). Emerging adulthood presents the prime adaptive task of stabilizing the self-concept. Middle adulthood concerns adapting to build upon the self-concept. Disengagement presents the principal task of realizing the self-concept in non-occupational roles. Developmental tasks thus convey socially and culturally expected responsibilities that individuals must meet with regard to developing a career. Adaptability promotes completing tasks associated with each stage to build resilience and a foundation for future career satisfaction and success.

In a review of life-span, life-space theory, Swanson (1992) stated that the decision-making processes such as career maturity that underlie life-span development in young adults needed integration with life-space processes, such as career adaptability, emphasizing establishment and maintenance, that had been researched among middle-aged and older adults. Other theorists followed and agreed with the proposed need for the integration of decision-making and coping process models to better understand career development (Brown, 1990; Krumboltz, 1994).

***Life-designing: Adapting to shape a life-career.*** Responding to these critiques and advancing Super's work, Savickas and an international group of colleagues (2009) proposed life designing as a new paradigm that could better capture the complexity of careers in 21st-century life. In so doing, they advanced adaptability as a central construct for shaping self through work and relationships building on the work of Savickas (1997) many years earlier. Savickas (1997) asserted that the construct of career adaptability within life-span, life-space theory addressed the components of learning, decision-making, and coping processes. As a construct, and central goal of life-design counseling, adaptability touches on the four dimensions of life-span, life-space theory incorporated in career construction theory (Savickas, 2013). One dimension concerns individual differences in the form of adaptive skills and styles. A second dimension involves development in the form of adaptation across the life course. A third dimension encompasses the self in the form of a phenomenological focus on subjective goals and movement toward an integrated self-view. A fourth dimension involves context in the form of historical and cultural factors such as barriers and affordances that shape career development.

From his analysis, Savickas (1997) defined career adaptability as “readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by changes in work and working conditions” (p. 254). He later elaborated on this definition within the life-design paradigm as follows:

Career adaptability denotes an individual’s psychosocial resources for coping with current and anticipated vocational development tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas that, to some degree large or small, alter their social integration (Savickas, 1997). Individuals draw upon these self-regulation resources to solve the unfamiliar, complex, and ill-defined problems presented by the tasks, transitions, and traumas. These resources are considered psychosocial because they reside at the intersection of person-in-environment. Adaptability shapes self-extension into the social environment as individuals connect with society and regulate their own vocational behavior (Savickas, 2013, pp. 157–158).

Savickas postulated that this understanding of adaptability supplants the core construct of career maturity in Super’s theory. The use of adaptability in both the life-design paradigm and in career construction theory proves congruent with the shift toward emphases on self-in-relation to environment and acknowledges contextual and multicultural perspectives on work and career (Flum, 2015; Leong & Flores, 2015). Thus, both in life-span, life-space theory and its successors the life designing paradigm (Savickas et al., 2009) and career construction theory (Savickas, 2002, 2013), career adaptability merges the areas of life-span and life-space as it represents an ongoing orientation toward coping with career developmental tasks, transitions, and traumas.

Super’s theory, rooted in functionalism, also was expanded via the work of Savickas (2002, 2013) and Savickas and his colleagues (2009) to meet the changing economic conditions and job climate of the 21st century. Savickas formed career construction theory by using social constructionism as a meta-theory to allow for the flexibility needed in shaping a self in relation to the world and to offer a contextualist alternative to the mechanism of P-E fit approaches and the organicism of life-span, life-space theory. Within career construction theory, career adaptability serves to delineate how individuals respond to and cope with personal and environmental changes that include vocational development tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas (Savickas, 2012a).

Savickas (2013) distinguished career adaptability from related constructs of adaptation and adaptivity. Adaptation refers to outcomes that result from adaptivity and adaptability. Such outcomes include life-role integration, stable role commitments, and active role management. Adaptivity refers to flexibility and willingness to make changes in self and situation by responding effectively to career-related tasks, transitions, and traumas. Consistent with career construction theory, adaptivity has been shown to predict adapting and adaptation behaviors (Perera & McIlveen, 2017) and in turn, adaptability predicts adapting responses as well as adaptation results (Rudolph, Lavigne, & Zacher, 2017). In sum, adaptivity means readiness to cope, adaptability involves having the resources to cope, and adaptation denotes results that emerge from adaptivity and adaptability.



In career construction theory, career adaptability is defined by four global dimensions: concern, control, curiosity, and confidence (Savickas, 2012a, 2013). These are enacted through attitudes and behaviors that allow individuals to master, negotiate, or resolve career changes. Through adaptive readiness and adaptable coping behaviors, individuals express *concern*, characterized by planfulness about their future career; *control*, marked by a feeling of agency and self-determination in career construction; *curiosity* about various occupations as well as a degree of self-knowledge; and *confidence*, signifying self-efficacy to deal with barriers to the career decision-making processes.

Savickas (2012a) postulated that individuals who are better prepared to cope with career tasks, transitions, and traumas will have better career-related outcomes, or adaptations. In research, career adaptability is associated with a number of outcomes, including improved goal self-regulatory behaviors (Goodman, 1994) as well as smoother school-to-work transitions, heightened job search strategies, and greater job satisfaction (Koen, Klehe, & Van Vianen, 2012). Chong and Leong (2015) researched an integrative model of career adaptability. Their findings suggested that career adaptability precedes strategic career management and is determined by conscientiousness, cognitive flexibility, and occupational exploration. Furthermore, Ginevra, Pallini, Vecchio, Nota, and Soresi (2016) provide evidence that career adaptability is preceded by positive attitude toward the future and future orientation in predicting career decidedness.

## From Career Maturity to Career Adaptability

Within life-span, life-space theory, career adaptability emerged from the construct of career maturity. Super (1955) posited that life-stage success requires career maturity, a term Super coined to explain and measure progress in moving through the developmental stages and tasks particularly associated with the Exploration stage of vocational development. Career maturity denotes attitudinal and cognitive readiness to make educational and vocational choices. Attitudinal readiness means active engagement in planning and exploring an occupational future. Cognitive readiness means possessing knowledge about occupations and how to make good career decisions. The Career Maturity Inventory (CMI; Crites & Savickas, 1995) measures global and specific dimensions of career maturity. Super and his colleagues (Super, Thompson, Lindeman, Jordaan, & Myers, 1979) subsequently constructed the Career Development Inventory (CDI; cf. Savickas & Hartung, 1996) to also measure level of career choice readiness more broadly in terms of engagement in career planning and exploration, as well as knowledge about career decision making and the world of work. Both the CMI and CDI are available free at [www.vocopher.com](http://www.vocopher.com).

Career maturity proved an apt term to denote increased choice readiness typically accompanying age and grade-level increases during the adolescent years. Despite attempts to apply the construct beyond the exploration stage, “the focus remained on a structural model of career maturity in adolescence”



(Savickas, 1997, p. 250). Recognizing this constraint and the limitations inherent in using a biologically-based term to describe a psychosocially-based process, the theory eventually replaced career maturity with career adaptability (Super & Knasel, 1981; Savickas, 1997; Super et al., 1996). As noted above, career adaptability entails having the readiness and resources to cope with developmental tasks, career transitions, and work traumas across the entire life span (Savickas, 1997, 2013). Recent research has advanced and supported career adaptability along three primary dimensions of planning, exploring, and deciding (Creed, Fallon, & Hood, 2009; Hirschi, 2009; Johnston, 2016; Koen et al., 2012). The most recently revised version of the CMI produced an adaptability form that measures the dimensions of career adaptability for diagnostic work with school populations up to and including twelfth grade (Savickas & Porfeli, 2011).

## Career Adaptability Dimensions

Career construction (Savickas, 2002, 2013) offers a contemporary advancement of the developmental perspective on vocational behavior and a comprehensive career assessment and counseling approach. The theory identifies four basic dimensions of career adaptability. This conceptual refinement indicates developmental lines wherein individuals must establish a foundation of (a) concern about the future, (b) control over their lives, (c) curiosity about occupational careers, and (d) confidence to construct a future and deal with career barriers (Savickas, 2002, 2013). The components of looking ahead to envision the future, owning one's life-career decisions to construct the future, looking around to explore work and career opportunities, and building confidence to solve problems form the critical theoretical dimensions of career adaptability and are, as well, represented in the research (e.g., Ginevra et al., 2016; Johnston, 2016; Rudolph et al., 2017). These four developmental lines of career adaptability (i.e., concern, control, curiosity, and confidence) extend through the traditional developmental career stages, or what Savickas (2013) termed the adaptive functions of orientation (growth in Super's model), exploration, stabilization (establishment), management, and disengagement and the tasks associated with these stages or functions. Developing career adaptabilities across these stages or functions entails forming distinct attitudes, beliefs, and competencies related to career planning, choice, and adjustment, referred to as the ABCs of career construction. These ABCs influence the strategies individuals use to solve problems and the behaviors they enact to align their vocational self-concepts with work roles over the life course (Savickas, 2013).

*Career concern* deals with issues of orienting to the future and feeling optimistic about it. It involves developing a sense of hopefulness and a planful attitude about the future. Lack of career concern leads to a problem of indifference toward and pessimism about the future. Experiences, opportunities, and activities afford individuals a growing sense of hopefulness and a planful attitude about the future. Insufficient attention to or hope for the future often precipitates negative emotions

and troublesome behaviors. Career counselors use time perspective interventions to increase career concern by heightening awareness, fostering optimism, and increasing future planning orientation and behaviors.

*Career control* involves increasing self-regulation through career decision making and taking responsibility for the future. It involves a sense of self-direction and personal ownership of the future along with a decisive attitude and an ability to make decisions about educational and vocational pursuits. Assertive behavior and willful acts nurture individual autonomy and self-reliance. Underdeveloped ability to control one's future creates a problem of indecision, wavering, and uncertainty about work and career choices. Career counselors use decision-making interventions to increase career control by clarifying self-concept, decreasing anxiety, and empowering clients to deal with opposition from parents and significant others.

*Career curiosity* reflects an inquisitive attitude that leads to productive career exploration, which permits an adolescent to realistically explore educational and vocational options and approach the future realistically (Savickas, 2013). Risk-taking and inquiring behaviors foster a sense of inquisitiveness about and interest in the world of work. Lack of career curiosity limits exploration and prompts unrealism and unrealistic aspirations and expectations about the future. Career counselors use reality testing and information-based interventions to prompt and reinforce exploration and ultimately increase knowledge about the world of work and foster exploratory behavior.

*Career confidence* deals with acquiring problem-solving ability and self-efficacy beliefs. It involves an efficacious attitude and an ability to solve problems and effectively navigate obstacles to constructing the future. Persistence and industrious behavior nurture a sense of self-assurance and equality in relation to others. Lack of career confidence leads to inhibition, self-consciousness, and timidity in approaching the future. Career counselors use role-play, social modeling, and cognitive-behavioral interventions to increase self-efficacy beliefs and foster self-esteem. Concern deals with having a future, control deals with owning the future, curiosity relates to exploring possible selves, and confidence refers to the ability to construct a preferred future and overcome obstacles. Career construction counseling has as a primary goal to increase a client's level of career adaptability so that they can more effectively produce their own development.

In summary, curiosity fuels the exploration of possible selves and occupations, career concern prompts the establishment of possible futures, confidence empowers individuals to construct a preferred future and overcome obstacles, and career control affords ownership of a chosen future. Career construction counseling has as a primary aim to increase an individual's level of career adaptability so that they can more effectively produce their own development in the face of changing opportunities and constraints (Savickas, 2002). The career adaptability model offers a solid conceptual framework for conducting career interventions and investigating their effectiveness. Additionally, the four adaptability dimensions have provided a guide for scale construction and development that has equipped counselors and researchers with a ready aid for appraising career adapt-abilities (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

## Conclusion

Career adaptability represents a useful theoretical and empirical construct for understanding vocational behavior. Rooted in the work of Super's life-span, life-space theory and now serving as a hallmark of the life-design paradigm and career construction theory and practice, career adaptability helps to explain how individuals cope in response to career development tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas. In doing so, career adaptability and its four dimensions offer researchers a conceptual frame for studying life-career design. It also offers practitioners a frame for assessing how best to assist individuals facing career transitions and changes and implementing appropriate interventions accordingly. Career adaptability fits the contemporary landscape of careers in assisting individuals with navigating self-in-relation to changing environments and career needs.

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Psychology of Career Adaptability, Employability and  
Resilience

Maree, K. (Ed.)

2017, XXV, 453 p. 22 illus., 13 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-66953-3