

Adaptability for Transitions: Components and Implications for Intervention

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Abstract

The increasing frequency of occupational change underscores the need for people to become adaptable in their career development. Traditional emphases on skill-building or competence in transition-assistance programs are argued to be insufficient in assisting individuals with transitions, and a process of transition adaptability that emphasizes self-management strategies and salience in addition to competence is presented. Implications for transition interventions and pre-intervention assessment are also discussed.

Résumé

La fréquence croissante des changements occupationnels sous-estime le besoin des gens à devenir plus adaptable dans leur cheminement carriérolgique. L'emphase traditionnelle qui mise sur le développement des habiletés ou des compétences dans les programmes d'assistance-transition sont présentés comme étant insuffisants pour les individus en transition et un processus d'adaptabilité à la transition mettant l'emphase sur des stratégies d'auto-gérance et de projection en plus de la compétence sont présentés. Les implications sur les interventions lors des transitions et l'évaluation de la pré-intervention sont aussi discutées.

Considerable energy and resources have been expended in attempts to assist individuals in making transitions in their lives. These attempts typically take the form of specialized programs or services directed towards helping a particular segment of the population make a specific transition. For example, most post-secondary education programs are designed to provide the learner with the skills necessary to make an occupational transition. Other programs, which emphasize the development of personal or vocational skills, abound in the public and private sectors. Despite these attempts to facilitate transitions, it appears that a considerable number of individuals are falling through the cracks in the support systems available to them (Fraze, 1988; Leana & Ivancevich, 1987).

In this paper, the reasons for this apparent failure are discussed, and suggestions for facilitating transition adaptability are presented. Emphasis is placed on the interaction of three integral components of adaptability: competence, self-management, and salience. Although the suggestions could be applied to a variety of transition situations, the discussion that follows focuses primarily on occupational transitions, such as those encountered in the transition from school to work, from

unemployment to employment, from one occupational category to another, or from one work setting to another. Implications for transition interventions and pre-intervention assessment are also discussed.

THE RISE IN OCCUPATIONAL TRANSITIONS

The term "transition" is used to represent any change of status encountered by an individual. Such changes inevitably produce a discontinuity of experience (Hopson, 1981), often resulting in changes in how individuals perceive themselves and their world; such assumptive changes require different behaviours and modes of relating to others (Schlossberg, 1981). These new behaviours and relationships may lead to growth or deterioration (Moos & Tsu, 1976). Thus, the transition experience involves an element of change, and the individual's response to that change.

Occupational transitions refer to any change in occupational status; such transitions have increasingly become a fact of life in North American society, with most people experiencing three or more occupational changes in their working life (Leibowitz & Lea, 1986). It would seem that the only thing that remains constant is change (Leibowitz & Lea, 1986; Herr & Cramer, 1988). Two major factors appear to contribute to this trend: (i) major structural changes in societal functioning, and (ii) an increased focus on individual growth, potential, status and success.

Structural Changes

North American society is increasingly being characterized as a society in transition. Futurists such as Toffler (1980) and Naisbitt (1982) have presented conceptions of a society embroiled in a fundamental change in the structure and means by which individuals survive. For example, industrial/manufacturing activities are giving way to information processing endeavours as the predominant source of wages (Drucker, 1989; Herr & Cramer, 1988). As the nature of work changes, so too will the requirements for occupational preparation. Auerbach (1988) noted that the fastest-growing employment areas are likely to be in highly skilled fields requiring the greatest amount of training. Furthermore, most people will have to engage in continuing education activities in order to keep abreast of changes in their fields. This trend will only exasperate an already difficult situation for the under-educated: they are most likely to experience unemployment and have the greatest difficulty in gaining access to entry-level jobs (Herr & Cramer, 1988).

An apparent outcome of these social and structural changes is an increasing number of individuals who experience unemployment; for the most part, these changes are involuntary transitions for individuals. Frazee (1988) claimed that 10.8 million Americans were victims of involuntary unemployment between the years 1981 and 1988. Leana and

Ivancevich (1987) suggest that this unemployment trend is not likely to improve in the near future. A common theme in the conclusions of such trend analysts is the need for individuals to be adaptive; in order to meet the demands of a dynamic and complex society, individuals will increasingly need to possess skills and attitudes that will enable them to adapt to a changing environment. The requirements of our emerging society may even demand new ways of cognitively responding to our environment, with an emphasis on holistic rather than immediate forms of perception (Ornstein & Ehrlich, 1989). Furthermore, individuals interested in assisting people through such transitions will need to pay considerable attention to the emotional effects of the transition (Amundson, 1989).

The need for adaptability arises from more than fundamental social changes (e.g., from an industrial to an information society); an additional factor is the accelerating rate of change. People have always needed to be adaptable; it is unlikely, however, that they have historically needed to adapt as quickly and as often as they do now.

Individual Growth and Potential

The second major factor contributing to the transition trend is an increased awareness of intrapersonal dynamics that foster change. A sizable body of research has focused on the "adult experience," and on the interaction of psychological and socio-economic factors in promoting change in people's lives (Arbeiter, Aslanian, Schmerbeck & Brickell, 1988; Braun & Sweet, 1983; Gilligan, 1982; Gould, 1978; Holland, 1982; Jones, 1980; Krantz, 1978; Levinson, 1978; Neugarten, 1968; Perosa & Perosa, 1983, 1984; Regan, Paltridge & Terkla, 1980; Sarason, 1977; Super, 1985). A common theme of these studies is that many individuals are seeking work and lifestyle transitions to increase personal fulfillment. There is an expectation that work should be meaningful, and a concomitant acceptance of change and transition as a normal part of life. Thus, in order to understand and facilitate the transition process, it is necessary to consider both individual characteristics and the external events and context within which the individual operates (Schlossberg, 1981).

COMPONENTS OF THE TRANSITION PROCESS

Adaptability, or the ability to make transitions, has become a necessary skill; people will need to master the process of transitions if they hope to be able to adapt to a rapidly changing environment. This process of adaptability for transitions has three major components: competence, self-management and salience (*cf.* Amundson's (1989) "capacity," "control" and "concern").

Competence

The competence component of adaptability includes generic and specific transition competencies. A generic transition competency is defined as one that is required in many, if not all, transitions of a similar nature. Examples of generic competencies may include the kinds of job-search skills, such as résumé writing or interview skills, that are commonly required for making most occupational transitions. Job maintenance skills such as interpersonal communications, problem-solving and decision-making skills are other examples of generic competence. Specific transition competencies are those required by the particular transition environment, and are usually task or situation specific. For example, the transition from a secretarial environment to a management environment requires specific competencies related to the management function.

The possession of generic and specific transition competencies is a necessary, though not sufficient condition of competence. In addition to being competent, individuals must perceive that they are competent. Perceptions of competence increase the likelihood of acting in a competent manner, and decrease the likelihood of stressful reaction. Bhagat and Allie (1989) studied 304 school teachers, and found that the teachers' sense of competence had a significant moderating effect on the symptoms of life stress that were experienced as a result of organizational or personal life stressors. This finding supported Jamal's (1984) earlier work pertaining to job stress. Thus, the competence component requires both the perception of competence (i.e., a cognitive appraisal) and the possession of generic and specific competencies (i.e., the skills and knowledge to perform specific tasks).

Self-Management

The second component of the transition process pertains to self-management strategies (i.e., methods of controlling self and environment). These strategies are consistent with Bandura's (1977) four components of self-management: setting goals, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-reward. Individuals have an impact on, and in turn are affected by their immediate environments. Individuals in transition need to be able to conduct their lives in a manner that is acceptable to the transition environment, and this often involves the acquisition of new self-management strategies. For example, most youth who fail on the job do so because they have not mastered the non-technical aspects of their work (Garbin, Salamone, Jackson & Ballweg, 1970). Kazanas (1978) referred to these non-technical skills as affective competencies, which include personal characteristics, values, habits, and work attitudes. Studies of transitions to employment for youth consistently cite affective and/or self-management strategies as being the most significant in hiring

or dismissal decisions (Ashley, *et al.*, 1980; Buck & Barrick, 1987; Kazanas, 1978).

In addition to self-management strategies, it is often necessary to learn ways of overcoming or changing conditions of the work environment. For example, there are often "office politics" that, once learned, may be used to one's advantage in shaping an environment more conducive to one's goals.

The possession of strategies to manage self and environment give individuals a sense of control. Once again, a distinction needs to be made between actual and perceived control; control is not exercised if one does not perceive oneself to be in control. The issue of control can be mediated by interventions aimed at developing both self and environment management strategies. For example, self-management strategies may be developed through instruction and practice in basic communication and assertiveness skills, which are necessary in most transitions. Strategies for clients to realistically experience self-esteem (e.g., by placing clients in work experience contexts in which they can succeed) are also important for facilitators to consider.

Salience

The third transition component is characterized by the salience of the transition for the individual. There are two categories of salience that affect transitions: structural and contextual. Structural salience refers to individuals' value systems, belief structures, interest patterns and personal characteristics, and are qualities that remain relatively stable over time. These characteristics provide structures around which individuals organize experience and from which individuals sort and store meaning. Thus, structural salience results when individuals derive meaning or value from experiences that directly relate to structural characteristics. For example, a desire to help people is a structural characteristic; an environment such as teaching provides opportunities for structural salience.

Contextual salience is temporal, and is a function of individuals' perceptions of their immediate circumstances. For example, an individual willing to take almost any job in order to feed his or her family is responding to a contextual issue: almost any job offer would hold the promise of contextual salience. In this example, what is relevant to the individual is the opportunity for income to meet immediate economic needs. Contextual issues may also reflect specific circumstance or environment; living conditions, family and peer relationships, cultural and personal background, and past and current employment settings are all features of the context of one's transition.

Contextual issues usually take precedence over structural issues; they are "prepotent" to use Maslow's (1954) term. As such, they are the first

points of consideration for most people. Further, contextual issues must usually be resolved before structural issues will be fully considered. However, regardless of the source of salience (i.e., structural, contextual or both), the transition itself must have personal meaning in order for individuals to effect changes in their lives. Thus, salience provides the motivation for managing change and will likely determine the extent to which intervention attempts are successful.

The model proposed here suggests that when competence, self-management and salience are in place, an individual is in a position to effectively complete a transition; in other words, the person is adaptable. Adaptability, defined as the ability to make transitions, cannot be assumed without the presence of each of the three transition components. Furthermore, although the components are described as distinct entities, they are highly intertwined. For example, an individual may be able to identify a transition that has salience, but without the dimensions of competence and self-management, the salience would have no focus.

In the model being proposed, adaptability connotes the capacity for managing change, not just the ability to cope with a specific kind of change. An individual may become adaptable to a very specific environment (e.g., making a specific occupational change) without having the ability to repeat the process should the environment change. In other words, the individual may possess situation-specific adaptability. A more generalized adaptability requires that the individual possess, in addition to specific environment-determined skills, both an attitude for innovation and an understanding of the strategies that could be used in making transitions. Until such expanded notions of adaptability are put into practice, individuals will continue to experience great difficulty managing change.

TRANSITION INTERVENTIONS

Individuals seeking some form of intervention aimed at transition assistance bring with them a set of perceptions based, to a large extent, on their past experience. As mentioned earlier, the perceptions that individuals have of their levels of competence, their self-management strategies, and their salience is as important as actual or demonstrated levels in each of these areas. Thus, an intervention's efficacy depends on its effect upon both actual and perceived adaptability.

Common Assumptions of Transition Interventions

Traditional modes of intervention, such as training programs, typically make two questionable and implicit assumptions regarding individual adaptability. The first assumption holds that as levels of specific competence increase, there will be an indirect though concomitant increase in adaptability. For example, in a carpentry training program there is the

tacit assumption that developing carpentry skills will enable learners to become carpenters. However, such increases in adaptability do not necessarily occur. Individuals may not possess the self and environment management strategies that allow them to implement new skills; that is, they may face barriers that prevent them from effectively applying their new skills. Not all training programs hold this assumption, of course. Those programs that emphasize work content (e.g., co-operative education programs, apprenticeship programs, programs with extensive practicums) typically do not make this assumption.

The second assumption of interventions designed to assist with specific types of transitions is that as levels of competence increase, the salience for the transition also increases. That is, as individuals increase their skills in a particular area, the relevance that the area has for them will also increase. This assumption may not be true in all cases. Individuals may begin transitions with limited or inaccurate information about either the area or the nature of the transition itself. When either the skills that are developed or the process that is required to develop the skills are in conflict with the values, interests, or beliefs of the learners, the salience for the transition may actually decrease. For example, studies have shown that specific job-related technical skills were rarely the primary determinant in hiring or dismissal decisions (Ashley, *et al.*, 1980; Buck & Barrick, 1987). Although it is possible that the effects of the intervention may cause changes in what is relevant for individuals (i.e., salience factors), it cannot be assumed that this will be the case. Most training programs hold this assumption, as evidenced by high drop-out rates in technical and university programs, and low to moderate success rates of employment-oriented programs (e.g., Canadian Jobs Strategy Entry and re-entry programs).

Implications for Interventions

Conceiving the transition process in terms of competence, self-management and salience has two major implications for transition interventions. First, the interaction of the three components of transition implies a need to restructure transition interventions. There has traditionally been an emphasis on the acquisition of specific or generic transition competencies at the expense of self-management and salience. For example, formal technical training programs at post-secondary institutions typically emphasize the acquisition of skills needed to perform in a particular role. Similarly, programs of intervention for assisting people in finding employment emphasize generic job search skills such as writing résumés and conducting interviews. However, contrary to the manner in which most interventions are structured, skills are not sufficient to develop qualities of adaptability in individuals (Magnusson, Day & Redekopp, 1988).

A second important implication for interventions intended to assist individuals in making transitions arises from the model: pre-entry counselling as a first step is critical to the success of the intervention. This pre-entry counselling serves to prepare the individual for the intervention, and helps to ensure that the intended intervention is appropriate. Typically, this process occurs in three phases: initiation, exploration and placement.

During the initiation or problem definition phase, an assessment of the entry-level characteristics of the individual is conducted. This assessment should include the identification of the individual's values, interests and existing levels of competence with respect to the transition in question. Furthermore, the individual's self-perceptions of competence, self-management and salience should be explored. Typical questions might include: what is the individual's present versus ideal state? Why is he or she considering making this transition now? What skills and attitudes does the person already possess with respect to the transition? What are the perceived barriers to making the transition?

The exploration phase allows for an examination of the appropriateness of the intended intervention. The entry-level characteristics identified during the initiation phase are examined in relation to the impact they may have on the potential for success of the planned intervention. As Amundson (1989) noted, emotional issues usually must be dealt with prior to specific career planning. Furthermore, some individuals may need to develop prerequisite skills in order to benefit from a specific program of intervention (Magnusson, 1992). Alternative forms of intervention may be explored at this time as well. For example, it may be necessary for an individual to come to terms with a substance-abuse problem before a program designed to assist with an occupational transition will be effective. In general, the outcome of the exploration phase should be the identification of the most suitable form and/or level of intervention for the individual.

The third phase of pre-entry counselling is the placement phase, in which an action plan is developed and implemented. Included in this phase is the identification of the kinds of intervention activities that will be engaged in, as well as a means of monitoring and evaluating progress through the intervention. Furthermore, the support structures or processes that may be needed in order to facilitate the acquisition of adaptability skills are identified. These usually include the identification and/or development of social and financial support mechanisms.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

There is an increasing demand on individuals to be able to make occupational transitions of one sort or another. This capacity for adaptation is comprised of three primary components: competence, self-management

and salience. The interaction of these components serves to emphasize the need for effective strategies of pre-intervention counselling, and the subsequent placement of individuals in appropriate levels of intervention based on these components. In this way, programs or strategies of intervention may become more focused, and therefore more effective in assisting individuals in becoming adaptive. Programs will simultaneously become more integrated and holistic, assisting individuals with their diverse developmental needs. The three components of transition are interdependent and mutually supportive; focusing on any one to the exclusion of the others is incomplete at best, and self-defeating at worst.

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