



Identity Flexibility During Mid-Career Occupational Transitions

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Abstract

Mid-career occupational transitions can require substantially more than acquiring new technical competencies or changing employers. For experienced professionals, occupational roles often become integrated with self-definition, reputation, social networks, expertise, and narratives of personal continuity. Moving into a substantially different occupation can therefore generate an identity challenge: individuals must preserve enough continuity with their established working selves to maintain coherence while becoming sufficiently flexible to experiment with unfamiliar roles, behaviors, professional communities, and future identities. Classical career-transition research established that occupational movement involves processes of sensemaking and adjustment, while later identity research demonstrated that professionals frequently experiment with provisional selves, revise career narratives, and engage in identity work when existing self-conceptions become inconsistent with emerging work demands.

The present study introduces identity flexibility as a proposed transition resource describing an individual's capacity to revise, broaden, temporarily loosen, and recombine occupational self-definitions without experiencing career change as complete loss of personal continuity. The framework integrates identity flexibility with career adaptability, identity experimentation, occupational identity threat, and transition adjustment. Because authentic mid-career transition data were not supplied, a reproducible synthetic sample of 420 hypothetical transitioning professionals was generated. Standardized multiple regression and interaction analysis were used to illustrate the proposed relationships. Identity flexibility emerged as the strongest positive predictor of simulated transition adjustment ($\beta = .365$), followed by career adaptability ($\beta = .306$) and identity experimentation ($\beta = .130$). Occupational identity threat was negatively associated with adjustment ($\beta = -.232$). The complete model explained approximately 52.2% of variance in the synthetic outcome.

The paper argues that adaptive occupational transition does not necessarily require abandoning a former professional identity. Instead, successful adjustment may depend on the capacity to retain valued elements of previous experience while testing alternative identities, revising occupational narratives, acquiring new competencies, and developing credible continuity between past and emerging selves. This interpretation is consistent with research on provisional selves, narrative identity work, career adaptability, identity threat, portable selves, and professional identity restructuring. The study offers a transparent conceptual and analytical foundation for future longitudinal research on mid-career reinvention.



Keywords: identity flexibility; mid-career transition; occupational identity; career adaptability; identity work; provisional selves; career change; professional identity; occupational identity threat; transition adjustment

1. Introduction

Career transitions have become an increasingly important topic in organizational psychology, career studies, and human resource management because working lives do not always follow stable sequences within a single occupation or organization. Career transitions can involve movement between organizations, occupations, professional communities, employment arrangements, or substantially different work-role configurations. Louis's early framework emphasized that career transitions include multiple varieties of role movement while sharing processes of change, contrast, and sensemaking. Nicholson subsequently developed a theory of work-role transitions connecting transition outcomes with characteristics of the individual, role, and organizational context. These foundational approaches established that occupational transition is not simply an administrative movement from one position to another; it is an adjustment process through which individuals interpret unfamiliar expectations and determine how much they or the new role must change.

The psychological significance of occupational transition can become particularly pronounced during mid-career. By this stage, many professionals have spent substantial periods accumulating domain knowledge, role-specific competencies, reputation, networks, routines, and occupational meanings. Hall and Mirvis argued decades ago that changing career structures required greater attention to identity development and adaptability, particularly during midlife and later stages of working life. Their analysis anticipated a movement from strongly organization-based career arrangements toward more self-directed career models in which individuals repeatedly renew competencies and career identities. Contemporary career research similarly emphasizes self-direction, values-based career management, flexibility, and career self-regulation as increasingly important resources for navigating less predictable career environments.

Mid-career occupational change is especially consequential when work has become central to how an individual answers the question "Who am I professionally?" Professional identity connects occupational membership with self-definition and role enactment. Research on professional identity construction shows that discrepancies between what professionals do and who they understand themselves to be can activate identity work. Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann found that work–identity integrity violations stimulated identity customization during professional development, while Brown's review characterizes identity work as the range of processes through which individuals construct, maintain, repair, revise, or negotiate understandings of themselves. When occupational transition substantially changes the expertise, status, language, professional community, or valued practices associated with an established career, the transition can therefore become simultaneously vocational and identity-related.

Ibarra's research on professional adaptation provides one of the most influential explanations of how people negotiate this difficulty. Rather than assuming that individuals first determine a finished future identity and subsequently enact it, Ibarra demonstrated that professionals can experiment with provisional selves: temporary possible identities tested through observation, imitation, behavioral

experimentation, and evaluation. Ibarra and Barbulescu later extended transition theory by explaining how people use self-narratives to reconstruct identities during macro work-role transitions. In this view, career transition is partly narrative: individuals revise stories connecting their previous experiences with an emerging role and use feedback from social interactions to determine whether those stories are credible and sustainable. Such findings suggest that identity transition requires neither complete rigidity nor unrestricted self-reinvention. It requires sufficient continuity for a new identity to remain believable and sufficient flexibility for new possibilities to be explored.

The present study develops this argument through the construct of identity flexibility. Identity flexibility is defined here as the capacity to modify the boundaries, content, and enactment of an occupational self-concept while preserving a psychologically credible sense of continuity across career change. It differs from career adaptability, which concerns psychosocial resources for coping with vocational tasks and occupational transitions, and it differs from identity experimentation, which refers more specifically to trying alternative occupational selves. Career adaptability has been extensively theorized and measured through dimensions such as concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. Identity flexibility is proposed as a complementary construct focusing directly on the malleability of occupational self-definition.

2. Objectives of the Study

2.1 To Examine Identity Flexibility as a Predictor of Mid-Career Transition Adjustment

The first objective is to evaluate whether greater flexibility in occupational self-definition provides a theoretically plausible foundation for stronger adjustment during mid-career occupational change. Identity flexibility is conceptualized as the willingness and capacity to reconsider statements such as “this is the only kind of professional I can be” without requiring the individual to dismiss the significance of prior occupational experience.

The expectation is that individuals with greater identity flexibility will be better able to integrate unfamiliar tasks, communities, competencies, and role expectations into an evolving occupational self. This expectation draws on evidence that professional adaptation can involve experimentation with provisional selves and that identity restructuring may occur through temporary loosening, learning, and subsequent modification of established professional identities.

2.2 To Assess Career Adaptability and Identity Experimentation as Complementary Transition Resources

The second objective is to distinguish identity flexibility from two related processes: career adaptability and identity experimentation. Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth conceptualized employability as a form of proactive work-specific adaptability involving career identity, personal adaptability, and human and social capital. Savickas and Porfeli subsequently operationalized career adaptability through concern, control, curiosity, and confidence as psychosocial resources relevant to occupational transitions.

Identity experimentation has a different emphasis. It concerns trying possible professional selves rather than possessing generalized resources for managing vocational change. The study therefore evaluates whether adaptability and experimentation make independent contributions to adjustment after identity flexibility is considered.

2.3 To Examine Occupational Identity Threat as a Constraint on Adjustment

The third objective is to determine whether occupational identity threat is negatively associated with transition adjustment and whether flexibility can partially reduce vulnerability to such threat.

Petriglieri conceptualized identity threat as an experience indicating potential harm to the value, meaning, or enactment of an identity. Mid-career transitions may generate such threats when previous expertise becomes less valued, professional status changes, familiar occupational communities are lost, or a new role appears inconsistent with an established understanding of the self. The study therefore treats identity threat as an important counterforce to flexible identity reconstruction.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Career Transition, Mid-Career Change, and Occupational Adjustment

Louis's seminal analysis of career transitions emphasized that job and profession changes generate surprise, contrast, and demands for sensemaking. Career transitions differ in origin and structure, but individuals entering unfamiliar occupational contexts must interpret new assumptions and expectations. This insight remains relevant to mid-career transitions because experienced professionals possess extensive expectations based on previous roles. Greater accumulated experience can provide valuable transferable knowledge, but it can also strengthen assumptions about what professional competence, status, behavior, and success should look like.

Nicholson's work-role transition theory added an explicit adjustment perspective. His model connected individual and contextual characteristics to different forms of personal and role development. Ashforth and Saks later tested aspects of Nicholson's model longitudinally and found evidence that transition adjustment is more complex than a simple choice between changing oneself and changing the role. Their work emphasized the importance of role novelty, feedback, discretion, and situationally activated individual motives.

Mid-career change deserves particular attention because occupational identities may become progressively consolidated across years of experience. Hall and Mirvis argued that the changing psychological career contract increases the need for identity development and adaptability across midlife and beyond. Rather than treating middle career as a period of permanent stabilization, they emphasized continuous learning and self-based career development. This perspective anticipates contemporary conditions in which professionals may have to respond to organizational restructuring, technological transformation, declining occupational demand, changing personal values, caregiving responsibilities, entrepreneurship, geographic mobility, or a voluntary search for more meaningful work.

3.2 Identity Work, Provisional Selves, and Narrative Reconstruction

Ibarra's study of professionals transitioning toward more senior roles demonstrated that adaptation involves active experimentation. Individuals observed role models, developed possible versions of themselves, tried selected behaviors, and evaluated those experiments using internal reactions and external feedback.

The concept of provisional selves is particularly important for mid-career occupational transitions because it reduces the pressure to make an immediate and irreversible identity decision. A professional can temporarily try behaviors associated with teaching, consulting, entrepreneurship,



management, data analysis, counseling, or another occupational pathway without initially declaring the previous career identity invalid.

Ibarra and Petriglieri subsequently distinguished identity work from identity play. Their work contributes to an understanding of experimentation as a process in which possible selves may be explored before they are fully constrained by the requirements of established identity claims. This is relevant to occupational reinvention because career transition often includes a liminal period in which individuals are neither entirely located within their former occupation nor fully recognized members of the new one.

Narrative identity work offers another transition mechanism. Ibarra and Barbulescu argued that self-narratives help individuals revise and reconstruct identity during macro work-role transitions. Successful transition involves developing narratives that can credibly express the emerging role identity in interaction with other people. Such narratives can create continuity by reframing previous experience as preparation rather than wasted history. A former engineer entering strategy consulting, for example, need not erase an engineering identity; prior analytical training can be reconstructed as a foundation for a broader professional narrative.

Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann similarly found that professional identity construction is activated when the work individuals perform becomes inconsistent with who they understand themselves to be. Their longitudinal study identified identity learning processes through which professionals customized identities to restore work–identity integrity. Brown's broader review reinforces the view that identity is neither completely fixed nor infinitely malleable. Identity work becomes particularly salient under ambiguity, tension, contradiction, or disruption.

3.3 Career Adaptability, Identity Threat, and Portable Professional Selves

Career adaptability represents one of the most developed psychological approaches to occupational transition. Savickas and Porfeli describe career adaptability resources through the dimensions of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. These resources support coping with vocational development tasks, occupational transitions, and work-related contingencies. Career adaptability therefore concerns the capacity to orient toward the future, exercise agency, explore possibilities, and believe in one's ability to solve career-related problems.

Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth provide a complementary employability perspective in which career identity and personal adaptability operate alongside social and human capital. Their framework treats employability as proactive adaptability rather than merely the current possession of a job. The significance for mid-career transition is clear: professionals carry not only technical skills but also self-concepts, networks, learning orientations, and interpretations of future possibilities.

Adaptability does not remove identity threat. Petriglieri argues that threats can arise when an identity's value, meaning, or enactment appears endangered. Individuals may respond by protecting, restructuring, or otherwise managing threatened identities. Mid-career transitions may produce especially salient threats because previous occupational identities frequently represent years of investment and recognition. A transition may therefore be interpreted not simply as an opportunity but as a potential devaluation of accumulated expertise and status.



Research on contemporary careers nevertheless shows that professional selves can become increasingly portable. Petriglieri, Petriglieri, and Wood examined processes through which individuals construct selves capable of supporting contemporary career mobility. Portability does not imply absence of professional commitment. Instead, individuals may develop identities that are less dependent on a single organization or narrow work setting while remaining anchored in broader values, capabilities, or professional purposes.

This literature provides the theoretical basis for identity flexibility. Career adaptability explains resources for managing vocational change, identity experimentation explains how possible selves are tested, and identity-threat theory explains why transitions can become psychologically defensive. Identity flexibility links these processes by describing whether the established occupational self can be revised sufficiently to accommodate new possibilities.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Conceptual Model

The present study uses a simulation-based quantitative design supported by an integrative theoretical synthesis. Simulation was chosen because no authentic dataset from mid-career professionals was supplied. This approach permits demonstration of the proposed analytical model without inventing real employees, professions, organizations, geographic locations, demographic profiles, or career outcomes. The synthetic sample consists of 420 hypothetical mid-career occupational transition cases. The designation “mid-career” is conceptual rather than demographic in the simulation; no fictional ages or years of service are assigned. This is important because mid-career can be defined through career stage and accumulated occupational experience rather than by a universal chronological threshold.

The proposed framework positions identity flexibility, career adaptability, identity experimentation, and occupational identity threat as predictors of occupational transition adjustment. An interaction between identity flexibility and identity threat is included to test whether flexibility changes the negative relationship between identity threat and adjustment.

Table 1: Proposed Operationalization of Study Constructs

Construct	Conceptual Definition	Illustrative Measurement Approach	Analytical Role
Identity Flexibility	Capacity to broaden, revise, recombine, or temporarily loosen occupational self-definitions while retaining credible self-continuity	Proposed multi-item 1–5 composite assessing openness to alternative professional selves, transferability of prior identity elements, and willingness to revise occupational self-definition	Primary predictor
Career Adaptability	Psychosocial resources used to manage career tasks, occupational transitions,	Adaptation-oriented 1–5 composite informed conceptually by concern, control, curiosity, and	Transition resource



Construct	Conceptual Definition	Illustrative Measurement Approach	Analytical Role
	and vocational uncertainty	confidence	
Identity Experimentation	Degree to which individuals test alternative roles, behaviors, narratives, and possible professional selves	1–5 composite assessing low-risk occupational experimentation and provisional-self exploration	Transition process
Occupational Identity Threat	Perceived threat to the value, continuity, meaning, or enactment of one's established occupational identity	1–5 threat composite	Negative predictor
Transition Adjustment	Degree of psychological and occupational accommodation to an emerging career direction	1–5 composite incorporating perceived fit, confidence, coherence, and adjustment to the new occupational direction	Dependent variable

Note: Identity flexibility is proposed in this manuscript as a conceptual construct and is not represented as an already validated psychometric scale. Career adaptability, provisional-self experimentation, identity work, and identity threat are grounded in established research.

4.2 Synthetic Data Generation and Variable Construction

All variables were represented on bounded five-point scales. Identity flexibility was generated with substantial interindividual variation to represent different capacities for revising occupational self-definition. Occupational identity threat was generated independently so that individuals with either high or low flexibility could experience substantial identity disruption.

Career adaptability was modeled as positively related to identity flexibility and negatively, though comparatively weakly, related to identity threat. This structure represents the theoretical expectation that flexible occupational self-definition may coexist with curiosity and control during transition without treating the constructs as equivalent.

Identity experimentation was generated as a function of both identity flexibility and identity threat. This reflects the possibility that individuals experiment with new professional identities because they are open to doing so, because their old identity has been destabilized, or through a combination of the two. Ibarra's provisional-self model and research on professional identity restructuring support an understanding of transition as active experimentation rather than passive psychological change.



4.3 Statistical Procedures, Reproducibility, and Ethics

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all five constructs. Predictors and the outcome were standardized before regression analysis so that coefficients could be compared directly.

A multiple linear regression model estimated the independent associations of identity flexibility, career adaptability, identity experimentation, occupational identity threat, and the flexibility $\times$ threat interaction with transition adjustment. (R^2) was used to summarize overall simulated explanatory performance.

For graphical interpretation, identity-flexibility scores were divided into four equal-frequency groups: low, lower-middle, upper-middle, and high flexibility. Box plots were selected rather than another bar or line chart because they communicate both central tendency and the distribution of transition-adjustment scores within each flexibility level.

No institutional ethics approval or informed consent was required because no human participants or identifiable records were involved. A future empirical implementation should obtain appropriate ethics approval, protect confidentiality, and avoid collecting career-transition information in ways that could expose participants to employment discrimination or organizational retaliation.

5. Analysis

5.1 Descriptive Pattern of Identity and Transition Variables

These values are characteristics of the generated dataset and do not estimate actual mid-career populations. Their analytical purpose is to provide sufficient variation for examining the proposed relationships.

Identity flexibility displayed the strongest positive independent relationship with transition adjustment in the standardized model. Career adaptability also made a substantial positive contribution, while identity experimentation remained positive after the other variables were controlled. Occupational identity threat showed the expected negative association.

5.2 Multivariable Prediction of Occupational Transition Adjustment

Table 2: Simulated Regression Model Predicting Mid-Career Transition Adjustment

Predictor	Standardized β	p-value	Direction	Interpretation
Identity Flexibility	0.365	< .001	Positive	Strongest positive predictor of transition adjustment
Career Adaptability	0.306	< .001	Positive	Higher adaptability contributes substantially to adjustment
Identity Experimentation	0.130	.002	Positive	Testing alternative occupational selves contributes additional adjustment value
Occupational	-0.232	<	Negative	Stronger threat to established

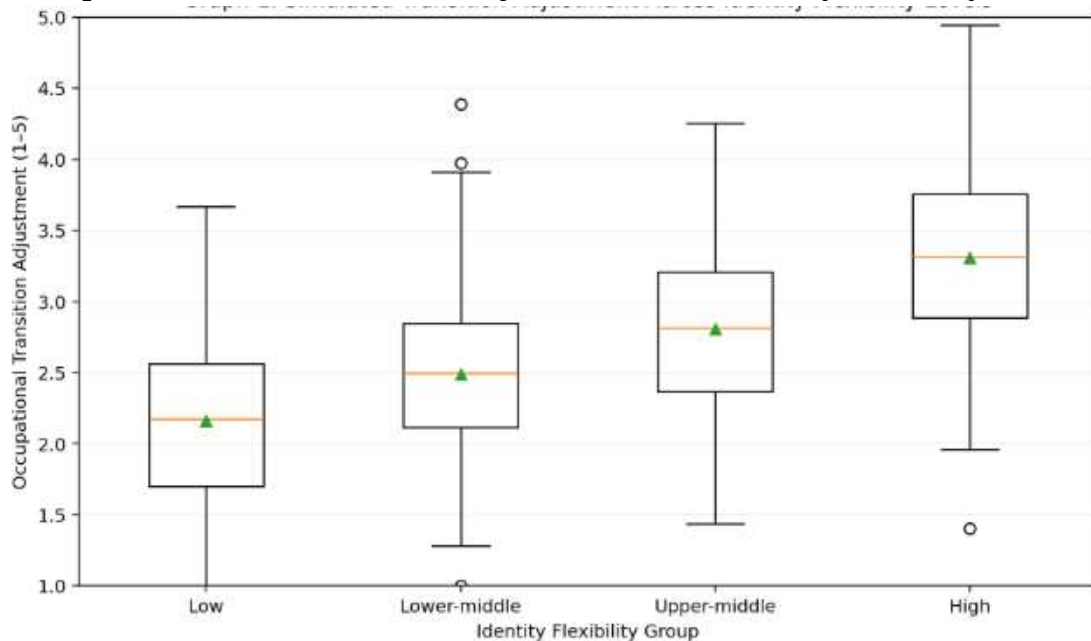
Predictor	Standardized β	p-value	Direction	Interpretation
Identity Threat		.001		occupational identity predicts poorer adjustment
Identity Flexibility $\times$ Identity Threat	0.061	.081	Positive but nonsignificant	Weak evidence of a buffering tendency; not statistically reliable in this simulation
Model (R^2)	0.522	—	—	52.2% of simulated variance in transition adjustment explained

Note: N = 420 synthetic cases. Standardized coefficients are simulation outputs and should not be interpreted as observed population effects.

Identity flexibility produced a standardized coefficient of $\beta = .365$, making it the strongest positive predictor in the model. The simulated relationship suggests that individuals represented as more capable of revising occupational self-definitions also showed better adjustment to an emerging occupational direction.

5.3 Distribution of Adjustment Across Identity-Flexibility Levels

Graph 1: Simulated Transition Adjustment Across Identity Flexibility Levels



The box plot demonstrates a progressive upward shift in occupational transition adjustment as identity flexibility increases. The low-flexibility group produced a mean adjustment score of approximately 2.16,



compared with 2.49 for the lower-middle group, 2.81 for the upper-middle group, and 3.31 for the high-flexibility group.

The median follows almost the same progression, indicating that the difference is not generated only by a small number of unusually high observations. At the same time, the distributions overlap. This overlap is theoretically meaningful: high identity flexibility does not guarantee successful career transition, and lower flexibility does not make successful adjustment impossible.

Career transitions occur within economic, organizational, relational, and personal contexts. Opportunities, financial resources, transferable competencies, labor-market conditions, discrimination, family responsibilities, mentorship, social networks, and organizational support can all shape the feasibility of occupational reinvention. Career-transition research consistently emphasizes that transitions involve multiple individual and contextual processes rather than one psychological characteristic.

6. Discussion

6.1 Identity Flexibility as Continuity Through Change

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the proposition that occupational identity can be flexible without becoming psychologically unstable. Mid-career transition is often described in terms of leaving an old career and entering a new one, but such language can exaggerate discontinuity. Experienced professionals usually carry forward skills, values, habits, relationships, reputational resources, and ways of thinking acquired in previous occupations.

Identity flexibility therefore differs from occupational detachment or absence of career commitment. A flexible identity may be strongly meaningful while remaining sufficiently broad to accommodate change. An experienced accountant entering business analytics may retain a self-concept centered on disciplined evidence, accuracy, and problem solving. A clinician entering healthcare administration may retain a commitment to patient welfare while changing how that purpose is enacted. A technical specialist moving into teaching may reconstruct expertise as something to be transmitted rather than personally executed.

Ibarra's provisional-self research provides a strong foundation for this interpretation. Professionals do not necessarily discover a finished future identity through introspection alone; they can develop it by observing possibilities, experimenting with behavior, and evaluating feedback. Identity flexibility can therefore be understood as the psychological permission to conduct such experiments without treating every deviation from the former occupational self as a threat to authenticity.

Narrative identity work provides an additional mechanism. Ibarra and Barbulescu show how individuals use career narratives to reconstruct identity during substantial work-role transitions. Narratives allow continuity to be actively produced. What initially appears to be a disconnected employment history can be reorganized around transferable values, recurring interests, or developing capabilities.

6.2 Experimentation, Adaptability, and the Management of Identity Threat

The second major implication concerns the complementary functions of adaptability and experimentation. Career adaptability provides resources for dealing with uncertainty, planning future



action, exploring alternatives, and maintaining confidence. Savickas and Porfeli's framework explicitly connects adaptability with occupational transitions and vocational contingencies. Hirschi and Koen similarly emphasize dynamic career self-regulation in contemporary career management.

Identity experimentation operates at a more specific behavioral level. Individuals may undertake temporary projects, professional courses, consulting assignments, volunteering, informational interviews, side ventures, mentoring relationships, or trial responsibilities that expose them to alternative occupational selves. These activities can generate information that purely abstract career planning cannot provide.

Ibarra and Petriglieri's distinction between identity work and identity play is particularly useful here because experimentation can create a protected space in which professionals explore alternatives before demanding full commitment from themselves or recognition from others. A transition strategy organized around small identity experiments can reduce the perceived finality of occupational change and create opportunities for iterative learning.

The nonsignificant interaction in the present simulation is also instructive. Identity flexibility should not be assumed to neutralize all identity threat. Some transitions involve genuine loss: occupational status may decline, qualifications may not transfer, professional communities may disappear, or involuntary restructuring may undermine valued expertise. Psychological flexibility can assist reconstruction, but it cannot erase structural disadvantage.

6.3 Implications for Career Development and Organizational Practice

Organizations frequently focus transition support on technical reskilling. Technical development is important, but the literature reviewed here suggests that occupational transition also involves identity development. A mid-career professional completing a training program may possess the required competence yet continue to think, "People like me do not belong in this role." Skills development without identity reconstruction may therefore leave an important part of the transition unfinished.

Career-development programs can respond by creating opportunities for identity experimentation. Temporary assignments, job rotations, project-based secondments, mentorship, cross-functional work, shadowing, portfolio projects, and transitional communities can allow individuals to test professional possibilities without requiring irreversible commitment.

Social feedback is particularly important. Provisional identities become more credible when relevant audiences recognize them. An individual may begin to see themselves as a researcher, manager, consultant, entrepreneur, designer, or educator partly because other people respond to them as legitimate participants in that role. Ibarra's work emphasizes the role of observation, experimentation, and evaluation, while narrative identity research shows that identity stories are refined through interaction.

Organizations undergoing restructuring should also recognize the emotional significance of occupational identity loss. Chen and Reay show that professionals can initially resist new work when it conflicts with established professional identity. Labeling such resistance simply as unwillingness to change may overlook the deeper question of whether employees perceive the new work as threatening a valued professional self.



7. Conclusion

Mid-career occupational transitions are not merely changes in employment location or task content. They can challenge a professional's accumulated understanding of competence, belonging, status, purpose, and personal continuity. Classical career-transition research established the importance of adjustment and sensemaking, while later identity scholarship demonstrated that professionals construct new occupational selves through experimentation, identity work, narrative reconstruction, and interaction with new professional communities.

The present paper develops identity flexibility as a proposed resource for navigating this process. Identity flexibility does not imply possessing a weak or undefined occupational identity. It describes the capacity to preserve core elements of professional self-understanding while allowing peripheral elements, behavioral expressions, and future possibilities to change. Such flexibility may enable experienced professionals to treat a new occupational direction as an extension and reconstruction of their career rather than as evidence that their earlier professional life has been invalidated.

The simulation provides an analytically transparent illustration of this framework. Identity flexibility emerged as the strongest positive predictor of occupational transition adjustment, followed by career adaptability and identity experimentation, whereas occupational identity threat showed a negative relationship with adjustment. These statistics are not empirical population estimates, but the pattern demonstrates how the proposed theoretical relationships could be examined in a genuine mid-career sample.

The wider implication is that successful career transition requires both continuity and change. Excessive rigidity can prevent individuals from recognizing emerging possibilities, whereas complete detachment from previous identity can undermine coherence and devalue accumulated experience. Effective transition may instead involve retaining valued professional foundations while experimenting with provisional selves, revising career narratives, acquiring adaptive resources, and gradually allowing an emerging occupational identity to become credible. Research on professional adaptation, career adaptability, identity work, and professional identity restructuring provides a strong foundation for empirically testing this proposition.

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