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Entrepreneurial Identity Formation Among Portfolio Career Workers

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Abstract

Portfolio career workers construct working lives across multiple concurrent or sequential activities rather than relying exclusively on a single organizational position. Their portfolios may combine freelancing, consultancy, contract assignments, professional practice, project work, creative production, teaching, digital services, micro-enterprises, and other income-generating activities. Such career configurations provide autonomy and diversification but also create a distinctive identity challenge: workers must transform multiple occupational roles into a sufficiently coherent understanding of who they are, what value they provide, and how they present themselves to clients, collaborators, and professional communities.

This study examines entrepreneurial identity formation among portfolio career workers through the interaction of role integration, career autonomy, market self-presentation, professional networks, opportunity recognition, and identity coherence. Earlier portfolio-career research demonstrates that movement from organizational employment toward portfolio working requires substantial self-management and narrative reconstruction, while entrepreneurial identity research shows that identity can influence entry into entrepreneurial roles, persistence, strategic behavior, and entrepreneurial passion. Because no primary worker dataset was supplied, the present article adopts a simulation-based explanatory design.

A synthetic dataset representing 180 portfolio career workers was generated for methodological illustration, together with five role-integration scenarios ranging from fragmented to highly integrated portfolio careers. The simulated Entrepreneurial Identity Coherence Index increases from 48 to 88 across these conditions, while perceived role fragmentation declines from 76 to 32. The graphical analysis also demonstrates a positive simulated relationship between portfolio role integration and entrepreneurial identity coherence. These numerical patterns are illustrative rather than empirical estimates. The study argues that entrepreneurial identity among portfolio workers is most likely to develop when heterogeneous roles are connected through an intelligible career narrative, transferable capabilities, opportunity-seeking behavior, network legitimacy, and a recognizable market proposition. The article contributes an integrative framework connecting portfolio-career research with entrepreneurial identity and professional identity-work perspectives.

Keywords: portfolio careers, entrepreneurial identity, portfolio workers, identity formation, career self-management, multiple work roles, career autonomy, entrepreneurial careers

1. Introduction

Traditional career models have often assumed relatively stable attachment between individuals, occupations, and employing organizations. Portfolio careers depart from this structure because individuals create working lives through combinations of assignments, contracts, clients, organizations, projects, and professional roles. Early research by Cohen and Mallon examined transitions from organizational employment toward portfolio working as part of broader changes associated with more fluid and individually managed careers. Mallon's research likewise showed that moving into portfolio work requires workers to make sense of changing career structures rather than simply replacing one employment contract with another. Gold and Fraser subsequently demonstrated that successful transitions to portfolio careers involve active self-management and are influenced by professional networks and safety-net conditions. Portfolio work should therefore be understood as both an economic arrangement and a career-construction process.

The identity implications of portfolio careers are substantial. A conventional occupational position frequently provides an established label through which individuals can explain their expertise and professional membership. Portfolio workers may instead occupy several partially overlapping roles at the same time. A consultant may also operate a small business, teach professionally, undertake freelance projects, develop intellectual property, and participate in industry communities. The challenge is not necessarily that these roles are incompatible. Rather, workers must determine whether the roles represent disconnected sources of income or components of a broader professional and entrepreneurial self-concept. Ibarra's research on provisional selves demonstrates that professional adaptation can involve experimenting with possible identities and evaluating them against both internal standards and external feedback. This perspective is particularly useful for portfolio careers because such workers repeatedly enter contexts that allow different aspects of their professional identities to be tested and revised.

Entrepreneurial identity provides an additional conceptual lens. Hoang and Gimeno conceptualize venture founding as a role transition in which founder-role identity can influence entrepreneurial transition and persistence. Farmer, Yao, and Kung-McIntyre similarly demonstrate the behavioral relevance of entrepreneurial identity aspiration, while Fauchart and Gruber show that founders can construct markedly different social identities that influence how ventures are created and managed. Murnieks, Mosakowski, and Cardon further connect entrepreneurial identity centrality with passion and entrepreneurial behavior. These studies indicate that identifying as an entrepreneur is more than adopting a descriptive occupational title; identity can organize motivation, interpretation, behavior, and strategic choices.

Portfolio workers occupy an especially interesting position because they may engage in entrepreneurial behavior before, or without, becoming conventional venture founders. They search for clients, package expertise, maintain networks, negotiate fees, create opportunities, differentiate their services, manage uncertain income streams, and decide which activities deserve future investment. Independent-work research has also noted blurred boundaries between employment and self-employment and the existence of hybrid entrepreneurial identities. Entrepreneurial identity among portfolio workers may therefore emerge gradually through repeated action rather than through one discrete transition from “employee” to “entrepreneur.”

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Against this background, the present study examines Entrepreneurial Identity Formation Among Portfolio Career Workers. It proposes that entrepreneurial identity strengthens when workers move from fragmented role accumulation toward portfolio role integration—a condition in which multiple work activities can be interpreted through a coherent professional narrative, shared capabilities, market positioning, and opportunity logic. Because no real portfolio-worker dataset was provided, the study uses transparent simulation rather than fabricated field evidence. The analysis explores how role integration, career autonomy, networking, opportunity recognition, self-presentation, and perceived fragmentation may interact during entrepreneurial identity formation.

2. Objectives of the Study

2.1 To Examine Entrepreneurial Identity as an Emergent Portfolio-Career Process

The first objective is to conceptualize entrepreneurial identity formation as an evolving process rather than an instantaneous occupational conversion. Portfolio workers may begin by describing themselves through established professional categories such as consultant, designer, engineer, trainer, researcher, writer, or specialist. As their careers become increasingly self-directed, however, they may begin to understand client acquisition, opportunity selection, service design, reputation building, and resource coordination as integral parts of their professional role.

This interpretation is consistent with identity research emphasizing transitions, enactment, experimentation, and social confirmation. Ibarra's provisional-selves framework shows that people adapt to professional change by observing possible role models, experimenting with possible identities, and evaluating those experiments. Entrepreneurial identity among portfolio workers can similarly emerge through repeated cycles of action and reflection rather than through formal business registration alone.

2.2 To Assess the Role of Portfolio Integration, Networks, and Opportunity Recognition

The second objective is to examine whether multiple career activities become more supportive of entrepreneurial identity when workers can integrate them into a coherent portfolio. Role diversity alone may not necessarily create entrepreneurial identity. A worker can simultaneously perform several unrelated jobs while continuing to understand each as a separate employment relationship. Stronger entrepreneurial identity is expected when workers begin to interpret their roles as complementary components of a self-directed market offering.

Professional networks are particularly important in this process. Gold and Fraser's analysis of transitions to portfolio careers identifies networks as important conditions surrounding successful self-managed career transitions. Networks can provide referrals, collaboration, reputation signals, knowledge, role models, and market information. Through these interactions, portfolio workers receive social feedback that can validate or challenge emerging entrepreneurial self-conceptions.

2.3 To Develop a Testable Framework for Portfolio Entrepreneurial Identity

The third objective is to construct an analytical framework that can subsequently be validated using real portfolio-worker data. The framework incorporates portfolio role integration, autonomy, market self-presentation, opportunity recognition, network embeddedness, role fragmentation, and entrepreneurial identity coherence.

Future research could apply the framework to freelancers, independent professionals, consultants, creative workers, academics with multiple professional engagements, hybrid entrepreneurs, digital contractors, and other workers who construct careers across organizational boundaries. Such validation could determine whether identity coherence predicts persistence, perceived career sustainability, entrepreneurial entry, income diversification, or opportunity-seeking behavior.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Portfolio Careers, Boundary Crossing, and Career Self-Management

Portfolio-career research emerged partly from wider debates concerning the weakening of traditional hierarchical career assumptions. Cohen and Mallon's study of professionals moving from organizational employment toward portfolio working emphasized the significance of perceived boundarylessness and individual sensemaking during career transition. Mallon's related work on "going portfolio" examined former organizational managers navigating more fluid careers, highlighting that career transition also involves reconstructing the meaning of career itself.

Gold and Fraser's research on freelance translators provides a particularly relevant analysis of portfolio self-management. Their work examines factors supporting successful transition from employment toward portfolio careers and specifically considers professional networks and safety nets alongside the principles individuals use to create coherent narratives of their working lives. This narrative dimension is central to the present paper because portfolio careers can contain objective diversity while still producing subjective coherence.

Portfolio work also involves tensions between flexibility and fragmentation. Platman's research on portfolio careers in later life illustrates how portfolio working can be associated with searches for flexibility. Yet flexibility transfers substantial responsibility for career continuity to the individual. Workers must acquire work, maintain reputation, update skills, manage relationships, and decide which combinations of activities collectively constitute a viable career. These responsibilities create conditions under which entrepreneurial ways of thinking may become increasingly embedded in career identity.

3.2 Identity Work and Entrepreneurial Role Formation

Professional identity is not fixed permanently when an individual enters an occupation. Ibarra's study of professionals adapting to new roles shows that individuals can experiment with "provisional selves," using trial identities as part of professional adaptation. This framework provides a mechanism for understanding why portfolio careers may become especially identity-intensive. Every new client role, project, market, or professional collaboration can expose workers to alternative interpretations of their own expertise.

More broadly, identity research emphasizes the relationship between self-definition and organizational behavior. Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley's comprehensive review describes identification as an important organizational process through which individuals define themselves relative to social and organizational categories. Portfolio workers encounter a different configuration because no single organization necessarily provides the dominant identity anchor. Occupational communities, client relationships, professional networks, entrepreneurial activities, and personally constructed career narratives may instead become more important identity resources.

Portfolio entrepreneurial identity can therefore be interpreted as a negotiated synthesis. A worker may initially introduce each role separately—consultant in one setting, trainer in another, freelancer elsewhere—but gradually develop a higher-order identity capable of integrating those activities. The resulting identity is stronger when role diversity can be explained through a common value proposition or professional purpose rather than appearing accidental or incoherent.

3.3 Entrepreneurial Identity, Behavior, and Persistence

Hoang and Gimeno explicitly connect founder-role identity with entrepreneurial transition and persistence, showing that the process of becoming a founder can be understood as a role-identity transition. Their contribution is important for portfolio workers because entrepreneurial action may begin before identity transition is complete. Individuals can perform entrepreneurial tasks while remaining uncertain about whether "entrepreneur" accurately describes who they are.

Farmer, Yao, and Kung-McIntyre provide further evidence that entrepreneur-identity aspiration has behavioral consequences and interacts with prior entrepreneurial experience. Fauchart and Gruber extend the identity perspective by demonstrating that founders can possess different entrepreneurial social identities—Darwinian, communitarian, or missionary—and that these identity patterns are associated with different venture logics. Entrepreneurial identity is therefore heterogeneous rather than reducible to one universal personality profile.

Murnieks, Mosakowski, and Cardon additionally connect identity centrality with entrepreneurial passion and behavior. Together, these studies suggest that entrepreneurial identity can influence the persistence and intensity with which entrepreneurial activities are pursued. For portfolio workers, the relevant question is whether repeated self-directed work experiences eventually become sufficiently central and coherent to reorganize how individuals interpret their overall careers.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Synthetic Analytical Sample

A simulation-based explanatory research design was adopted because no primary dataset involving portfolio career workers was provided. No real participants, employment records, freelance-platform profiles, client information, financial records, or personally identifiable data were used. Consequently, the numerical analysis should be interpreted strictly as methodological demonstration rather than evidence concerning an actual population.

Two analytical components were constructed. First, five portfolio role-integration scenarios were created, ranging from 20% to 100% integration maturity. Second, a synthetic cross-sectional dataset representing 180 hypothetical portfolio career workers was generated to demonstrate the expected association between portfolio role integration and entrepreneurial identity coherence. The simulated workers should not be interpreted as sampled respondents.

4.2 Construct Operationalization

Portfolio Role Integration represents the degree to which an individual's different work activities are connected through common capabilities, goals, professional narratives, or market positioning. Career Autonomy reflects control over project selection, sequencing, client relationships, and career direction.

Market Self-Presentation refers to the ability to communicate a recognizable professional proposition across multiple activities.

Opportunity Recognition represents the capacity to perceive possible combinations of knowledge, clients, markets, collaborations, or services. Network Embeddedness captures access to trusted professional relationships capable of generating information, referrals, legitimacy, or collaboration. Role Fragmentation represents perceived disconnection among portfolio activities. Entrepreneurial Identity Coherence reflects the extent to which self-directed opportunity seeking and value creation have become integrated into the individual's career self-definition.

Table 1: Operationalization of the Portfolio Entrepreneurial Identity Framework

Construct	Analytical Meaning	Measurement	Expected Relationship
Portfolio Role Integration	Degree to which diverse work activities form an intelligible and connected career portfolio	Index 0–100	Positive
Career Autonomy	Perceived control over projects, clients, scheduling, and career direction	Index 0–100	Positive
Market Self-Presentation	Ability to communicate a coherent value proposition across work contexts	Index 0–100	Positive
Opportunity Recognition	Capacity to identify possible new projects, markets, collaborations, and service combinations	Index 0–100	Positive
Network Embeddedness	Access to professional relationships providing referrals, legitimacy, information, and collaboration	Index 0–100	Positive
Role Fragmentation	Perceived incompatibility or disconnection among portfolio roles	Index 0–100	Negative
Entrepreneurial Identity Coherence	Degree to which entrepreneurial behavior forms a stable and intelligible component of career self-definition	Index 0–100	Positive

Source: Author-developed simulation framework informed by portfolio-career and entrepreneurial-identity research. Portfolio-career studies emphasize self-management and narrative construction, while entrepreneurial-identity research connects role identity with entrepreneurial transition and behavior.

4.3 Simulation Procedure and Analytical Criteria

The five scenario conditions were constructed to represent movement from fragmented multi-job participation toward integrated portfolio entrepreneurship. At the lowest condition, work activities are relatively disconnected and the individual relies primarily on separate occupational labels. Intermediate conditions introduce greater autonomy, stronger market self-presentation, network development, and deliberate combination of professional capabilities. The highest condition represents a mature portfolio in which role variety is retained but organized through a coherent professional and entrepreneurial narrative.

For the 180-record synthetic dataset, Portfolio Role Integration values were generated across a broad 0–100 range and Entrepreneurial Identity Coherence values were modeled to rise with integration while retaining substantial individual variation. The graphical trend is therefore illustrative rather than inferential. No significance tests, confidence intervals, population coefficients, or causal estimates are reported because conventional inference from intentionally simulated data would create a misleading appearance of empirical validation.

5. Analysis

5.1 Development of Entrepreneurial Identity Across Portfolio Integration Levels

Table 2. Simulated Entrepreneurial Identity Outcomes Across Portfolio Role-Integration Conditions

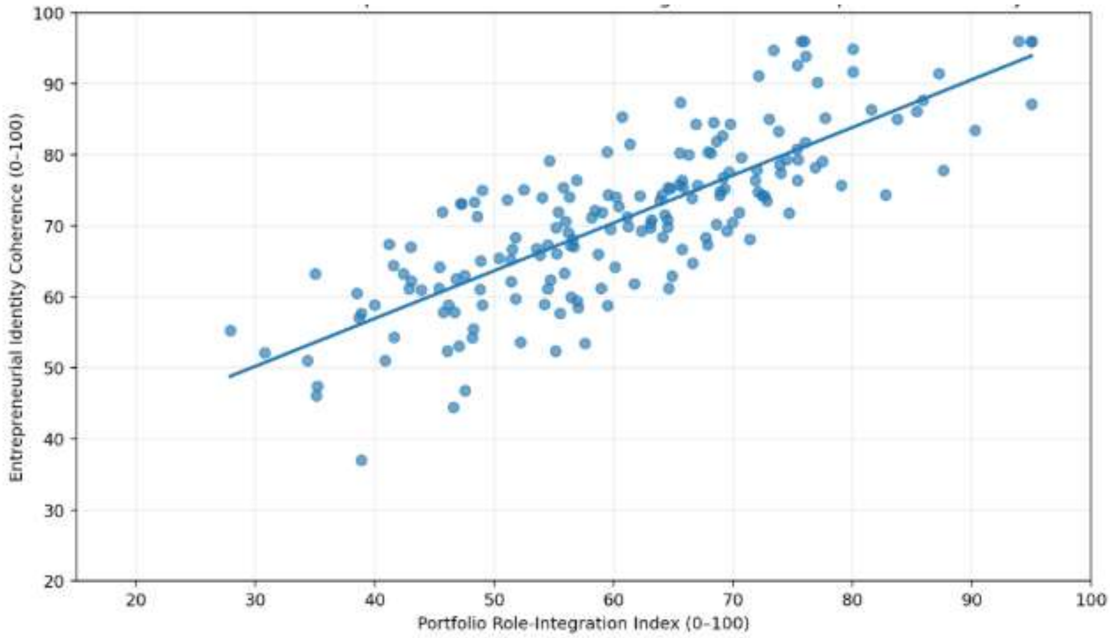
Portfolio Role Integration	Career Autonomy	Market Self-Presentation	Opportunity Recognition	Network Embeddedness	Role Fragmentation	Entrepreneurial Identity Coherence
20%	54	45	51	50	76	48
40%	63	58	61	60	66	59
60%	73	70	73	71	54	70
80%	84	82	84	80	42	81
100%	91	90	91	87	32	88

Note: All values are synthetic indices constructed for analytical illustration. They are not observations collected from real portfolio career workers.

5.2 Portfolio Role Integration and Entrepreneurial Identity Coherence

The graphical analysis of the 180 simulated worker profiles shows a positive relationship between portfolio role integration and entrepreneurial identity coherence. Lower-integration profiles show substantially wider uncertainty in identity coherence, whereas stronger integration tends to coincide with increasingly coherent entrepreneurial self-definition.

Graph 1: Simulated Relationship Between Portfolio Role Integration and Entrepreneurial Identity Coherence



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The theoretical interpretation is consistent with identity-transition research. Ibarra demonstrates that new professional identities develop partly through experimentation and evaluation rather than appearing instantaneously. Hoang and Gimeno similarly frame entrepreneurial entry as a role transition in which founder identity affects movement into and persistence within entrepreneurial activity. Portfolio workers can therefore accumulate entrepreneurial experience before an entrepreneurial identity becomes fully coherent.

The scatter visible around the fitted trend is equally important. Portfolio integration alone should not be expected to determine identity perfectly. Two workers with similar portfolios may interpret their careers differently depending on prior occupational identification, economic motivation, professional community membership, opportunity aspirations, family considerations, or perceived legitimacy. The framework therefore treats identity formation as probabilistic and socially negotiated rather than mechanically determined by the number of roles performed.

5.3 Networks, Opportunity Recognition, and the Reduction of Role Fragmentation

Network Embeddedness increases from 50 to 87 across the simulation conditions while Role Fragmentation declines from 76 to 32. This pattern represents the theoretical proposition that networks can perform an identity function in addition to their economic function. Professional contacts do not only provide work; they also communicate how others perceive the worker's capabilities. Repeated referrals for related forms of expertise can reinforce a coherent market identity even when the underlying portfolio contains several occupational activities.

Gold and Fraser's portfolio-career research explicitly identifies professional networks among the conditions relevant to successful self-management. Entrepreneurial identity research adds that identity can shape and be shaped by entrepreneurial experience and behavior. Combining these perspectives suggests a recursive mechanism: a worker's emerging identity affects which opportunities are pursued; those opportunities generate experiences and network feedback; and the resulting experience further strengthens or modifies identity.

Opportunity Recognition increases from 51 to 91 across the simulated conditions. This increase reflects a transition in how workers interpret their own capabilities. Fragmented workers may perceive each capability within a separate occupational category, whereas integrated portfolio workers can combine capabilities across domains. The same person may begin to recognize that expertise developed in one role can create services, partnerships, or market opportunities in another. Entrepreneurial identity therefore becomes connected not merely with independence but with the capacity to reinterpret one's existing career resources as components of future opportunity.

6. Discussion

6.1 From Multiple Work Roles to an Entrepreneurial Career Narrative

The primary implication of the study is that a portfolio career does not automatically produce an entrepreneurial identity. Individuals can hold several jobs or assignments while continuing to understand each role independently. Entrepreneurial identity formation becomes more likely when individuals construct a narrative explaining why these activities belong together and what distinctive value emerges from their combination. Earlier portfolio-career research supports the importance of sensemaking and coherent career narratives during movement away from organizational employment.

This process helps distinguish role multiplicity from role integration. Role multiplicity concerns the objective presence of multiple work activities. Role integration concerns the subjective and strategic connections among those activities. A worker who simultaneously teaches, consults, writes, and develops digital products may initially experience four competing roles. The same portfolio may later be understood as an integrated knowledge-based enterprise in which teaching generates insight, consulting provides market exposure, writing builds reputation, and digital products scale expertise.

Ibarra's provisional-self perspective helps explain how such integration can emerge gradually. Portfolio careers repeatedly expose workers to audiences who respond differently to their identities. The worker can test labels, service propositions, professional narratives, and entrepreneurial roles, retaining those that create both internal authenticity and external recognition. Identity formation is therefore an iterative career-development process rather than a branding exercise completed at one point in time.

6.2 Entrepreneurial Identity as Both Resource and Constraint

The second implication concerns the consequences of stronger entrepreneurial identification. Entrepreneurial identity can provide motivational and behavioral direction. Farmer and colleagues show that entrepreneurial identity aspiration has behavioral implications, while Hoang and Gimeno connect founder identity to entrepreneurial transition and persistence. Murnieks and colleagues similarly demonstrate the relationship among entrepreneurial identity centrality, passion, and behavior. For portfolio workers, stronger identity coherence may therefore help sustain opportunity-seeking activity despite uncertain income, project rejection, or fluctuating demand.

However, stronger identity is not necessarily universally beneficial. Entrepreneurial identification can become restrictive if workers begin evaluating every activity exclusively through commercial opportunity or interpret portfolio diversification as inconsistent with a narrowly defined entrepreneurial self. Fauchart and Gruber demonstrate that entrepreneurial identities themselves vary substantially and embody different motivations and relationships with markets and communities. Portfolio entrepreneurial identity should therefore preserve sufficient flexibility to accommodate changing professional priorities.

This point is especially important because portfolio careers derive part of their value from optionality. Workers may retain teaching for meaning, consulting for income, creative production for self-expression, and venture activity for growth. An integrated identity does not require collapsing all these motivations into a single commercial objective. More sustainable identity formation may instead involve constructing a broader entrepreneurial self capable of coordinating diverse purposes without forcing complete uniformity.

6.3 Implications for Career Sustainability and Professional Development

The third implication concerns career sustainability. Portfolio workers carry substantial responsibility for managing employability, client relationships, professional development, and transitions between assignments. Gold and Fraser's research shows that portfolio transitions involve self-management and are shaped by networking and supporting conditions. Entrepreneurial identity can provide an organizing framework for these responsibilities by shifting career thinking from “Which job do I hold?” toward “Which capabilities, relationships, and opportunities constitute my professional portfolio?”

For career-development professionals, this suggests that support for portfolio workers should extend beyond conventional résumé preparation or job-search guidance. Interventions could help workers map transferable capabilities across roles, identify common themes in successful assignments, construct a credible professional narrative, assess which activities reinforce one another, and understand where portfolio complexity is producing unproductive fragmentation. Such practices are conceptually consistent with identity-transition research emphasizing experimentation and feedback.

7. Conclusion

Portfolio careers challenge conventional assumptions that occupational identity develops primarily within a single organization or through one continuous professional role. Workers operating across multiple projects, clients, occupations, and income streams must construct a more self-directed interpretation of career continuity. This study has argued that entrepreneurial identity provides one possible organizing mechanism through which heterogeneous work experiences can become connected into a coherent career narrative.

The simulation demonstrates a theoretically plausible progression in which Entrepreneurial Identity Coherence increases from 48 under the lowest portfolio-integration condition to 88 under the highest, while Role Fragmentation declines from 76 to 32. The synthetic analysis of 180 hypothetical portfolio career profiles also shows a positive relationship between Portfolio Role Integration and

Entrepreneurial Identity Coherence. These results are not empirical effect estimates. They illustrate relationships derived from portfolio-career, professional-identity, and entrepreneurial-identity scholarship and are intended to support future empirical testing.

A central conclusion is that entrepreneurial identity formation does not depend simply on holding several jobs or becoming formally self-employed. It develops through the interpretation and integration of experience. Portfolio workers increasingly acquire an entrepreneurial identity when they recognize connections among their capabilities, deliberately construct market relationships, identify opportunities across work domains, receive external confirmation of their value, and build a narrative capable of explaining why their diverse activities form one career rather than a collection of unrelated tasks.

Future research should validate the framework through longitudinal studies following workers as their portfolios develop. Such studies could examine whether entrepreneurial identity precedes portfolio integration or develops as a consequence of it, whether identity coherence predicts financial and subjective career sustainability, and how economic necessity differs from opportunity-driven portfolio entrepreneurship. Comparative research across consultants, creative workers, academics, digital freelancers, skilled professionals, and hybrid entrepreneurs would also help determine how occupational institutions shape identity formation.

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