The world around us is in a tsunami of transition which is overwhelming our capacity to act, work, think and live our lives. Almost all of us are facing transitions in our careers, our relationships, our places in the world, our health, our identities. The average professional now stays in a role for four years, and nearly a third of the workforce will change their job every year. Women are seeking work and life transitions that reduce their disparities in pay, economic security, personal safety and health. Millennials who questioned the very idea of a job as we know it are now feeling the need for security. Baby Boomers are starting new lives and careers all over again. Generation Xers are caught in the middle and desperate to find the next step. And who knows what Generation Z will manifest in its future, though it certainly will involve the global environmental crisis and questions about the nature of modern capitalism.

So, like everyone these days, I have been reflecting on my profession and place in my world. I have run a successful company and have been coaching high performers ever since I founded my sports psychology company, Sporting Bodymind, with my friend and business partner John Syer. I started as a sports psychologist in the 1980’s, began working with business people in the 1990’s, and became a performance consultant to musicians in the 2000’s.

Over the last decade I began to work increasingly with individuals in transition: these could be people who had taken on a very senior role in a new organisation and were struggling, or they had transferred to a new team and were not performing in the new culture. Or perhaps they had moved from being an expert performer to being a leader of expert performers. Sometimes these people simply needed support: they may have been struggling and unable to admit it publicly, and sought help to understand why and how to meet their challenges. Sometimes, formerly brilliant performers were on the verge of momentous career failure.

Most of these individuals were dealing with a transition from familiar territory into new incognita: companies, roles, functions and performance environments where their old assumptions and modus operandi were simply not sufficient to deliver the requirements of their new positions. I had been working ‘in the field’ – at the application end rather than in research – for 30 years – which was too long! And so, as a coach and psychologist working with people in transition, I precipitated a transition for myself. I left my successful business to delve deeply into a multi-year research project on the foundations and root knowledge of my work. What is the true nature of transitions? What are the skills and characteristics that enable people to make transitions successfully? How do we learn to grow and thrive on transitions?

But what interested me most was how we achieve our purposes in our work: how the choices we make and the actions we take steer us on a course that brings meaning to our lives. I explored numerous models of the stages we progress through in life: some focused on career stages (e.g. Crites and Hall), others on life stages (e.g. Levinson and Erikson). Some elaborated on psychological development models, while still others focused on career stages (e.g. Schein or Super). And while still other approaches focus on the transition process itself, most notably Bridges and Eisner and Farell, they actually seemed formulaic.

Torbert’s model of different leadership styles identifies different stages and end states, though I was not clear how he addressed transitions rather than the end states that he delineates. Herninia Irama’s model of changing working identity was most fascinating, but focused almost exclusively on changing from one profession to the next, for example, from Spanish teacher to equities trader. Finally, there is the continued use of Kübler-Ross’s model based upon life crises, death and dying to explain transitions in life and work – while work transitions don’t actually match the progression of the psychological states she identified so profoundly.

So despite all the models and maps of transitions, I was left informed, but unsatisfied. No one seemed to have addressed head on why some people make repeated successful transitions in their careers and lives while others don’t, or can’t.

The research study

I conducted an in-depth, cross-domain study with leaders in business, sport and music who had made repeated successful transitions to very senior levels in their fields: traders who became bank group vice presidents; automotive engineers who became CEOs; football players who became managers of teams; yachtsmen who became chiefs of Olympic teams; musicians who became heads of faculty and principals of conservatories. My research was underpinned by major theoretical models for career development, intelligence, motivation and personality theory. The outcome was the development of a comprehensive profile of the type of person who is able to make repeatedly successful transitions in their careers and their lives. I call this Transition Expertise.

Transition Expertise brings together two very different human capabilities. Expertise is generally defined as superior performance in a domain as agreed by other expert representatives for that domain or by an established measure of expertise: a concert pianist, a Wimbledon champion or a Nobel Laureate scientist are all experts in their respective domains. Indeed, there are expert ‘tinkers, tailors, soldiers and sailors’. Expertise is a relatively short-lived state that is aspired to and achieved over time through a combination of ability, training and dedication. However, transitions are by definition unstable states. They require the release of old patterns and the adaption or invention of new ones.

To develop Transition Expertise you need to be comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty, yet cultivate an attentiveness to your environment and awareness of self, and also access a range of skills and abilities to navigate through uncharted waters. It is this expertise which enables you to map a course through change, thrive in new or unknown distances, and draw upon your strengths while all the time remaining true to yourself.

Transition Expertise

Here are the main aspects of Transition Expertise.

Intrinsic Motivation: to think of oneself as true

“I was never satisfied and not because I think I was an over achiever – it was more because I felt: ‘Oh there’s so many things that I haven’t done still, or that I didn’t do right’”

Your motivation for making a transition will shape not only your success in that transition but also the direction your life takes. Though it is common to think of incentivising people in terms of extrinsically motivating factors such as pay, job security or social esteem, in fact it is intrinsically motivated choice which makes transitions successful repeatedly over the course of your career. Intrinsic motivation will ensure that your career choices are congruent with who you are; you will be more likely to realise your true gifts; and personal satisfaction, the joy of achievement, and challenge – not external rewards – will shape long-term success.

Personal Resilience: stay the course, weather the storms

“I am extraordinarily focused and I think of nothing else than how to package this argument up – how to promote this strategy or how to win the authorities round”

“I used to say ‘in out, in out’ – I must make the team for two years and the third year in the cycle I seem to be dropped and then I make it for two years and the third year I’d be dropped’

Your personality is the vessel which carries you as you chart your course in the changing world. Personal resilience maintains a strong but flexible identity. It is much more than coping and is not captured by terms like ‘hardness’. Rather, resilience should be considered as the right mix of ego strength that enables one to remain clear and centred in the face of challenges, and ego resilience, which means being secure in one’s identity so that you can adapt to changing circumstances and grow your self-concept, or sense of self. Resilience helps you sustain effort during a transition and overcome the challenges.

you meet. Persisting in the face of adversity, rebounding from setbacks, enduring over time, along with seeking and seizing the initiative, are all indications of personal resilience.

**Mental Agility: adapt and reinvent**

“You can contribute better because you’ve come without the baggage”

“I adapted”

“You can have an eight-carriage motorway and the art is how you sneak in and out of your carriageways”

Transitions are not achieved by planning, problem-solving, goal setting and assessing the results. This approach is outdated and inappropriate for transition. More specifically, automatically (the ability to undertake tasks ‘without thinking’) is very important when you need fast access to your knowledge and skills, for example when returning a tennis backhand or responding to a short-term trading challenge. But habits can be deadly when we confront a new situation or seek to respond to a new opportunity. You need to interrupt the mindsets that hinder your move into the new. You will need cognitive flexibility to avoid preconceptions. And, when you are mentally agile, you don’t fall back on reductive bias, the tendency to oversimplify, which turns dynamic processes into fixed objects, makes complex interactions linear, and turns interdependent relationships into simple one-to-one or two-to-one interactions. You will avoid functional fixedness, the temptation to apply the same solution to different situations or assume that a given problem can only be solved by one method.

**Generative Intelligence: induction, inference, analogy and metaphor**

“It think your brain becomes quite like a flow diagram if you do Latin and Greek”

“I often do use music in artistic analogies as a way to confront an issue”

It is a good start to be mentally agile. But on its own it is insufficient. You also need the kind of intelligence which enables you to generate new and different ideas. Generative intelligence, such as the use of induction, inference, analogy and metaphor, helps build a bridge from old experience to new experience. You will recognise general patterns from specific experiences through induction. You will use inference from your previous experiences to draw conclusions about a new situation in which you find yourself. Analogy and metaphor will help you see parallels between current situations and past experiences.

It is useful to understand the workings of generative intelligence because, while creativity utilises generative intelligence, it is inadequate to blanket everything as ‘just being creative’. Nor is generative intelligence the same as ‘transferable skills’. Transitions require you to move consciously into the new, not unconsciously; to build the new, not recreate the old.

**Intra-personal Intelligence: self-awareness and gut feelings**

“I try and solicit, seek out areas of potential weakness or areas for improvement”

“It’s the question I keep asking myself”

Intra-personal intelligence enables you to learn about yourself and understand how you learn. This is not some new intelligence discovered in the late twentieth century. It is a central aspect of all major models of intelligence going back to the roots of earlier research by the likes of Spearman and Binet, Thurstone and Guilford. You have a fundamental self-awareness. You discover over time both your strengths and weaknesses. You are able to adapt and respond with discrimination to different situations. You reflect and turn your reflections into action. You will have a deep, non-verbal self-knowing, a felt sense that helps you validate the rightness of your choices for when, where and how you make a transition.

**Inter-personal Intelligence: it’s always about people**

“Understanding where people are and being more in tune with them and understanding what it is that every person can give”

“Reaching out to people”

“Throughout careers it is about relationships and it’s about building relationships”

Inter-personal intelligence enables you to recognise, understand, and work with people, empathise with others, to understand from their language and behaviour what is transpiring inside them. You will be able to seek and understand the appropriate kind of feedback. You will know how to benefit from the abilities of others and how to ensure that they benefit from yours. Ultimately, inter-personal intelligence will help you shape and grow those you lead.

As Howard Gardner points out, inter-personal intelligence is developed independently with intra-personal intelligence. But having the one doesn’t ensure you will have the other in equal measure. Nor are the two in any way synonymous with introversion and extraversion.

Case Study

Peter is a senior VP for a large multinational energy company. After training, he found his first job in consulting engineering, but after his first year he realised that he was not challenged by his position. Already his intrinsic motivation was asserting itself. So, he initiated a move to the company where he would spend most of his career: a state-owned energy company which was known for its refined culture, its international engagement and its opportunity for growth.

When, two years into his new job, a position came up for a sideways move into energy trading, he seized the opportunity: ‘A colleague mentioned the position; the company was growing and I simply took the leap.’ Initiative combined with mental adaptability would prove to be key elements of his make-up. He knew that he did not have the financial or mathematical facility of his trading colleagues, but he realised that he could step back and use an engineering systems model to organise his trades. He soon found himself heading a team trading energy futures.

Peter became highly regarded for the cohesive team of players he built through his inter-personal intelligence. Once again, he found himself wondering what he would do next when a position came up to organise the logistics of a major shipping operation within the company. Though this was totally beyond his expertise, he knew enough by now about the flows of the international energy market to predict where and when to ensure that the right kind of energy resource could be accessed. His inferential intelligence, along with a strong contextual intelligence, helped him do this.

Peter decided to avail himself of an MBA programme supported by the company and in so doing made good use of his contextual intelligence to find out where to access resources, people, information and advice. At this point, he suddenly thought to himself: ‘I’ve achieved my original life objectives: So now what?’

Deciding that he wanted to run his own operation Peter took an amazing leap to head up a regional operation in South Africa. His continued mental adaptability enabled him to respond to an intrinsically motivating challenge that stretched his abilities because of the great cultural differences. He developed relationships with knowledge experts in both the culture and language of the country; these individuals also knew how to navigate the minefield of local and international laws. At the same time, Peter had a diverse team of financial, human resources and operations people reporting into him. ‘It was not by chance that I had and kept such a good team. I could not have succeeded without them. So I found them, formally and informally, and we worked together impressively.’

While he was thinking about returning home, Peter instead accepted a position as CEO to the newly acquired but large division in the USA. ‘While the overall performance of the division was central, I simply loved helping people learn and grow.’ He became deeply intra-personally reflective on his role in the company as an agent for developing talent, and constantly sought advice and support from people who understood human nature. At this later stage of his career, Peter fully actualised his intrinsic motivation – which went beyond a challenge or achievement and led to a growing sense of purpose in his life and work.
Contextual Intelligence: the world at your fingertips

“It was the environment… it was the culture, the challenge and the way people worked together”

“There is no substitute for personal responsibility. This is not a call to action, but a demand to take ownership of your own life.”

“Because of where I was, I sought out learning opportunities from people who were world leaders in their fields and gave me an understanding of issues”

Contextual intelligence is the most generally useful of the transition intelligences. It is not inter-personal intelligence though it is sometimes confused with this. It is partially captured in Sternberg’s idea of shaping, adapting and selecting the environments in which you work. Nor is it social intelligence as typified in Cantor and Kilstrom, which usually includes a range of inter-personal intelligences and perceptual abilities. Contextual intelligence is both more and less than these models. Specifically, it is demonstrated through the apprehending of your environment and understanding the nature of its people, resources and cultural artefacts such as language and symbols. It enables you to understand the new environment into which you are moving, to shape it where you can and adapt to it appropriately where it cannot be changed.

Purpose: get aligned

“I think if you love the art of music you can put up with anything really. If you see it as a means to an end, you’re likely to get disillusioned and unhappy very quickly. So I don’t think there was ever an occasion when I would go to a concert and wish I wasn’t there”

“There were various things that I am completely passionate about in sport and I love excellence and I am passionate about in sport and I love excellence and I...”

“...and so I went to my interview because of where I was, I sought out learning...”

“...and so I went to my interview because of where I was, I sought out learning...”

Contextual Intelligence: the world at your fingertips

As the philosopher Plato wrote, 2,500 years ago ‘Purpose... is the full use of your potential, in the pursuit of excellence’, and this underlies the choice of title by Peters and Waterman for their classic management book, _In Search of Excellence._

How not to transition

Transition expertise is not the same as professional expertise. In fact, your professional expertise may be your weak spot. When you become an expert in a subject, it is likely that, if not many, of the more general ways of thinking and acting that you will need during transition may have become tied to your expert knowledge. They may not be easily extricated from those knowledge-specific anchors to use in new circumstances.

Counter to many assumptions, taking it slowly one step at a time is not the answer: incrementalism can be a slow death. Sometimes you simply need to take the leap. It is amazing how many of the individuals in my study were ready to jump in and seize the opportunity rather than carefully calculate and plan a move. In fact, my research clearly indicated that slow, carefully calculated transitions tend to be too little, too late.

Extrinsic motivation will leave you stranded. Career choices based upon extrinsic motivators like security, money and status may achieve short- to mid-term results. But in the longer term they will leave you with money, security, status but not a lot else. Early career choices often combine a successful mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. But as you progress it is important to constantly ensure that challenge, satisfaction, flow, achievement and autonomy steer your transition choices.

Emotional Intelligence is not transition expertise. EQ is a hybrid model: a mix of personality, intelligence, learned behaviour and affect management that has captured the business imagination. It is a useful model but, despite its name, not really an intelligence. Nor does it deal exclusively with the emotions. And its components differ from model to model.

Don’t ‘Plan-Do-Study-Act’! Dr Deming’s process will not help you manage a successful transition. Planning, self-management, problem-solving and risk analysis are all wonderful management techniques for stable, incremental change. But they are not the means with which to make a transition. Nor will they provide you with the kind of fleet-of-foot thinking required in a new environment. Over-reliance on the mindset cultivated by these approaches will absolutely hold you back.

About the author

Christopher Connolly PhD co-founded SycOn – The Sporting BodyMindGroup – with John Syer in the 1980s. They pioneered applied sports psychology working with selected football clubs, Olympic teams and professional athletes in Europe and the USA. He has applied his expertise in the private and public business sectors for 30 years, lectured widely and made numerous appearances on television and radio. He has co-authored several books including _Sporting Body, Sporting Mind_ and _How Teamwork Works_. His most recent research on career transitions will be published in his sixth book, _Transition Expertise_.

Don’t spend 10 years and 10,000 hours practising, practising, practising. This dated message from the ‘deliberate practice school’ is so contrary to what is required of you when you transition that it should be banned from our repertoire and language! Time to move on from this limiting and unhappy making formula of unpinning drudgery!

Avoid seeking homeostasis. ‘Homeostasis’ refers to the tendency of organisms to maintain a steady state at all times, whereas transitions are by their very nature non-homeostatic. In a transition you are more often interrupting and breaking a former pattern. The processes you use mentally, emotionally and behaviourally to maintain homeostasis will be the very ones that let you down and hold you back when you transition.

More than ever, career transitions require transition expertise...

We live in a VUCA world – Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. More than ever, career transitions require Transition Expertise. Career changes that move you from one field of endeavour to another, from Spanish teacher to investment banker, or football player to lawyer, are difficult when entrenched and limited conceptions of yourself result in identity foreclosure. Re-organisation of yourself requires Personal Resilience.

Your self-concept is a personality construct, a fundamental sense of who you are. It is your vehicle for the expression of your potential and your purpose for being. In this rapidly changing world, we need continually to re-assess who we think we are, how we respond to our challenges, the ways we use our gifts and potential, and why we are motivated to change. Successful transitions depend upon our ability to make conscious, informed career and life choices. In so doing we acquire wisdom as we grow into ourselves and our abilities; these are developed through experience and practice – they help us guide ourselves as well as lead others into the emerging future. Transition Expertise enables you to chart and then steer a true course towards attaining your full potential in work and life.