



READINGS IN GLOBAL ORGANIZATION DESIGN

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INDIVIDUAL CAPABILITY AND OUR WORKING JOURNEY

by Andrew Olivier

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Andrew Olivier's article "Individual Capability and Our Working Journey" paper is an excellent article for those not familiar with how requisite concepts apply to talent pool management. Olivier describes the "working journey" that characterizes the process of moving through progressively higher levels of capability. The potential impact on society from effective talent pool management is also given attention and suggests how national human resource policies can affect the development of a nation's talent pool.

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Individual Capability and Our Working Journey

Andrew Olivier

WHAT'S IMPORTANT

- The longest task an individual has is managing his or her own life goals and career. How we experience our own journey, how we discover our own potential, how we manage to use as much of our potential as we can are the keys to career development and life satisfaction.
- The CEO and executives need a sensitivity to the "Working Journey" concept, an empathy that individuals be all that they can be by helping them find fit between their capability and work role, and understand when they need to move to the next job.

Our Working Journey is public, for others can observe and judge our capability in action and where our decisions impact the journeys of others. It is also a private journey, for it is yours to travel and no one else can do it for you. To understand how to manage it, we need to understand how our capability shapes its path and creates certain changes.

For many executives, one of the best ways to learn the concepts of requisite organization is to apply them to their own individual work life experience, what I have come to call the *Working Journey*. This article is about how the growth of our individual capability drives our Working Journey and the impact this has on talent pools. I will show you how to understand your own transitions from one level of capability to another. You can use the same methods and ideas to manage other talent pools of any size, whether within your team, site, organization, region, or nation.

Capability and capacity have already been defined in other articles in this book, which reviews the work of Elliott Jaques and others in the area of requisite organization (RO). While much of Jaques's work focused on designing effective organization structures and systems to manage the enterprise and plan for leadership succession, a different group led by Gillian Stamp at Brunel University developed expert methods to assess capability. Her work, with its focus on understanding individuals' career paths and fit by following their career progression over the years, led to seeing the capability growth in individuals over time. It brought humanity to the RO approach, a humanity that provides powerful explanatory support to the individual and deepens the manager and manager-once-removed (MoR) understanding of key employees.

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Capability, the Engine of Your Working Journey

Elliott Jaques's research shows that individuals process information differently and that this ability grows and evolves *predictively over time*. It is this predictive aspect that has provided greater insight into career management, appreciating change in a Working Journey, and allowing organizations to allocate and manage human capital over time.

Jaques's array of time horizon growth curves maps the growth of our capability over time according to nine growth modes. This allows us to predict when someone will make a transition into a new order of complexity in his or her Working Journey.

Our cognitive capability drives our need to actualize, and thus powers our search for the kind of work or opportunities that let us fully use it. The greater our future capability, the more we actively seek change, the more we seek out new environments, and the more we influence the journeys of others. This can both be a blessing and a curse!

Jaques's framework underpins the capability assessment instruments that use the growth curves as a basis. Knowing the location of an individual on the growth curves (i.e., an individual's mode) allows one to predict his or her growth rate over time. Jaques was firmly opposed to commercialization of these methods of assessments and preferred organizations to do capability assessments themselves, favoring a process known as talent pool calibration or gearing, in which managers and MoRs judge their subordinates' capability. However, this is often not aimed at personal development or individual awareness, but rather effective talent pool management.

Flow: When Your Capability Matches Your Work

The aim of understanding the work required as well as the individual's capability is to match the two together, providing the conditions for being in what Csikszentmihalyi called "flow."¹ Flow occurs when you lose yourself in what you are doing, a hobby, a task or a job, forgetting even the passing of time with the enjoyment of what you are doing.

Csikszentmihalyi's characteristic of flow also describes the state when your level of cognitive capability matches the level of work required by your role and the role engages your sense of purpose, knowledge, and skills. You are cognitively engaged, interested, allowed to experiment, have accountability and responsibility, and are recognized, rewarded, and fulfilled. When you are underutilized, have more capability than the role requires, or over-extended, not having the level of cognitive capability to cope with your role, you move away from flow.

This movement is on a continuum. If over-promoted or in a role beyond your level of cognitive capability, you move from flow to perplexity, not knowing how to respond or which signals are relevant or what decisions to make; then worry, waking

1 Csikszentmihalyi, M. *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper and Row, 1990.

up in the early hours of the night still churning in your mind; and finally, into psychological anxiety. If the situation is not addressed, this can lead to depression. (See Sidebar 1 for an example of being out of flow because of over-promotion.)

Being underutilized is similarly debilitating. When your role is smaller than your current level of cognitive capability, what used to be flow becomes boredom because of not being fully engaged in your work. Farther from your level, it becomes indifference, not caring about your performance or goals. Farther still from a good fit, it can lead to psychological anxiety. Again, if the situation is not addressed, depression can result.

Both ends of the continuum represent potentially serious situations. Being underutilized or over-extended for prolonged periods may cause people to resort to substance abuse, depression, and withdrawal, loss of energy for life and a host of other related symptoms.²

Promoting a person into a role before he or she has the necessary cognitive capability is setting that person up to fail. These failures can cost the organization dearly, as well as damaging the individual's Working Journey. Likewise, leaving individuals too long in a role when they have excess cognitive capability means they are at risk of leaving, and/or becoming increasingly bored and a liability to the organization.

Mismatches can lead to debilitating anxiety in the individual, which is why you and your organization must watch your transitions from one level to another. However, ultimately it is your Working Journey and you alone are accountable for it.

Work and capability matching is a necessary (but not sufficient!) condition for flow on the job. It is a time when our well-being at work seems to flow into our personal journey as well, when everything moves easily, success comes almost effortlessly; it's a golden time. The challenge is to work with this shifting kaleidoscope and ensure that, as far as possible, you are doing the right work at the right stage of your life. This makes it vitally important that you understand and plan for your transitions.

Passages, Transitions, and Your "Call to Adventure"

Transitions refer to that point in time when cognitive processes shift from one way of looking at and processing the world to another, when we move from one level of complexity to the next. As with most transitions, these times can be confusing and stress-

² Stamp, G., and Stamp, C. (1993). "Well-being at Work: Aligning Purposes, People, Strategies and Structures." *International Journal of Career Management*, Vol.5, No 3.

1. PROMOTING BEFORE READY DESTROYS THE FIRM

A level IV capable individual was inappropriately promoted into a level V CEO role. Capable of distilling established intent into frameworks and models to guide operations at IV, he was overwhelmed by the required work to set strategic direction in his new organization. To compound the problem, the new CEO's direct reports were comfortable with the same level IV complexity, so the work level was crowded and there was no clear leader. The new CEO was not able to lead from one requisite level above his direct reports and his response, predictably, was to retreat to a command-and-control model, get rid of dissension, focus on the short term, and manage through bullying tactics.

Lacking the required level V capability, he proceeded to implement a new system without considering his organization's capability, the feedback from his team, or the market's readiness. His failure in the role caused the organization to incur substantial costs, lose market share, demoralize employees, and provoke a public outrage that resulted in a commission of inquiry with subsequent loss of image and reputation. Eventually, he and the organization parted ways, but the damage was done.

ful, exciting and illuminating, damaging or highly fulfilling, depending on your work and life context. Often transitions are marked by proactive change: leaving a company, changing career direction, or ending relationships as different work and creative challenges are sought. Failure to find work or expression at the next level can result in increasing frustration and anxiety; a former high achiever can lose self-confidence and reputation. By ignoring the transitions of its employees, the company stands to lose both the high potentials and the time and resource it costs to replace them.

These transition periods are fundamentally important times for us. They represent a "Call to Adventure" (a concept borrowed from Joseph Campbell's 1971 work) in which we are all called upon to make a heroic journey, a pilgrimage or quest.³ We feel dissatisfaction with where we are, with our work and lives, losing that joy in our work that comes with flow, but do not have a clear picture of where go. The Call to Adventure begins subtly, and if ignored, grows increasingly strident. Some ignore it, making a trade-off with other values; some accept the Call with alacrity; and some may not even notice it, easily stepping up their current work to meet their grow-

3 Campbell, J. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Bollingen Series XVII. Princeton University Press, 1971.

ing capability. But for many the urge to find flow and actualize becomes so strong that the call is answered. We embark on a new journey within the greater Working Journey of our lives.

The search begins to find Csikszentmihalyi's "flow" and Campbell's "bliss," that place where what we do feels right, feels good, and has intrinsic recognition and reward. We seek again that time of synchronicity, energy connections, and abundance—a golden time. We seek mastery of the new challenges that the transition has brought. On this sometimes perilous journey, success is not guaranteed. Setbacks and failure are often important teachers.

Each journey ends with a return. Campbell postulates that we see a new being emerging, a very different individual to the one who started out, so hesitant and unsure. Returning, we are bearing new skills, garnered wisdom, and tales of adventures. Each of these journeys and transitions may vary in number and duration, depending on the mode, but few journeys are shorter than 6 years and some may last 20 or more years. They are fundamental drivers in our lives. For those who will transition more than once, each new transition is another Call to Adventure, a new chance to voyage and recreate oneself.

Talent Pools

As our capability develops, we transition and seek new roles for challenges and mastery. This simple fact also has major implications for groups striving to capitalize on the potential and capability within their talent pool. There are many different types of talent pools, of course, and we occupy one or more at any given time. There are national talent pools and within that there are multitudes of configurations: corporate talent pools, industry talent pools, entrepreneurial talent pools, sporting talent pools, and so on. However, most of us perform most of our choreographed work within organizational talent pools.

Organizations are keen to identify future leaders and top executives create succession plans or leadership pipelines to grow future managing directors and CEOs from within the organization. Fundamental to this mission is to identify those individuals who may develop the capability to work at a level V or strategic intent perspective. Jaques's growth modes provide this insight and this potential capability can be identified in individuals as young as their early 20s.

For those tasked with managing the organizational talent pool, there are a few basic principles that require explanation.

Transitions

People should be moved to experience a new work level during or shortly after a transition. This requires knowing who is able to operate at what level, when this will shift, and what appropriate development is in order so that they can operate effectively at the new level.

Although people pipelines focus on leadership succession, transitions should be watched at all levels. Most organizations will have people at levels I and II who are capable of working at the next level, as Mary's story illustrates. (See Sidebar 2.)

Both people pipelines and transitions require an in-depth understanding of the tasks and the individuals, both currently and what they may look like in the future. Understanding the individual's potential and the evolution of the role and structure of the organization is crucial to managing the transition effectively.

Simple Supporting Systems

Overviews of talent may take the form of a matrix that maps potential and performance, or another form of coding that records the relevant information. Whatever the system, it facilitates the managers' decisions around talent allocation and development, which means that the information needs to be easily understood and laid out concisely.

People Pipelines

Actively manage your people pipelines to ensure that a flow of talent is created and managed for the different work levels. Talent pool candidates may need to be grouped into disciplines or job families for direct succession routes.

One level VI global company, comprised of four level V strategic business units and a host of other related financial entities, struggled to establish how the corporate center should add value to the organization. Some business units used requisite organization concepts and some did not. Support functions were sometimes cen-

2. NATIONAL CALL CENTER EMPLOYEE

"Mary" joined an organization as a trainee in a national call center. Her group received intensive training and had its capability assessed as part of an experiment. The call center manager battled a 30 percent turnover rate and low engagement scores, as well as a declining market share. The experiment assessed the cognitive capability of top performers, non-performers, and a control group.

Capability appeared to be a key factor in performance. Successful call center operators relied on the full range of skilled quality work (level I), and also had the capability to move into level II within the next five or so years. They were mode III individuals within a specific age grouping. Those who were poor performers were a mix of individuals who could not cope with the level required as well as those who were underutilized by it.

Mary was a mid-mode V and already well into high level II. This fact indicated that she would not find fulfillment in an already stressful environment, and indeed she did not. The national call center manager used the capability assessment information to fast track her to team leader. A year later she helped set up a new call center, and she is now a national sales manager.

tralized and sometimes not; for example, some entities had their own training and leadership academies, while others did not.

The company identified the corporate center's unique added value as the preparation of leaders for the passages from level III to IV, IV to V, and V to VI. The focus of the corporate core, therefore, shifted to managing the people pipeline and the focus of development became what was required to be successful at the next level.

James Strong's story (see Sidebar 3) illustrates a salient point: high-potential individuals move around and, while they are in your company, talent pool managers need to know, track, and develop them effectively. They are the drivers of the future organization. High-mode individuals are also a key national resource. A nation needs to ensure that high-potential talent is attracted and sometimes repatriated back to the country to ensure its viability.

3. JAMES STRONG: HIGH POTENTIALS MOVE AROUND A LOT

James Strong joined the Australian Army at the age of 16. When he left the Army at 19, he was already cognitively comfortable with level III work. His leaving was often put down to "discipline difficulties," though clearly he was able to operate at a level far beyond that expected by the Army. He was bored and out of flow.

James joined the mining industry and was rapidly promoted to a leadership role while he continued studying law. At 39, he left the mining industry and moved to Canberra as an industry lobbyist. In his early 40s, he took on the role of privatizing a state airline. This was a golden time, a time of "flow," and he loved leading from the front. He received widespread acclaim for his success as CEO. At 45, he was managing partner of a national law firm, only to discover again that he was bored. After completing his brief, he became CEO of Qantas Australia's iconic airline. Here he headed the most rapid growth phase ever experienced by Qantas, firmly establishing it as a leader in its industry. He retired in his late 50s.

James is now chairman of a number of blue chip companies, such as IAG, Australia's largest general insurer; Woolworths, the highly successful food retailer; and Rip Curl, a surfing lifestyle company operating globally, as well as chairman of the Australian Council for the Arts.

What is interesting is that James made dramatic career changes at all his transition points. His Working Journey is characterized by occupying multiple talent pools, multiple transition points, and many Calls to Adventure, not all of them easy to heed. He recalls that letting go of the CEO "monkey" as he transitioned into level VI was the toughest thing to do.

Entrepreneurial Talent Pools

High-mode individuals enjoy creating uncertainty in their Working Journeys by deliberate perturbation. Transition points cause fundamental changes and the entrepreneurial career path illustrates this well.

A study was conducted over a six-year period of 40 entrepreneurs in Southern Africa, all operating in highly volatile environments. Crime, widespread poverty, lack of skills, economic sanctions, and protectionist government policies had hindered business formation and growth. All were successful and first-time business owners. Company sizes varied from 20 employees to almost 40,000, structures varied from national to multinational, and ages of the businesses from 4 years to more than 40 years.

All of the entrepreneurs were high-potential individuals with growth modes from mode V to VII. More than 50 percent came from corporate backgrounds and had left their organizations in frustration, often while working in high level III roles. All were in a phase of personal transition between work level III and IV or were underutilized in high level III positions with no career move in sight. Some tried to utilize their capability and reduce their frustrations by registering for higher degree studies, such as MBAs. The theses they wrote served as seeds for many entrepreneurial ideas that became successful. This was the time that they started their businesses.

The transition into level IV seems to be a critical period and is the time when people most leave an organization in search of greener pastures. From an entrepreneurial and organizational growth perspective, each time they personally transitioned work levels, they ratcheted their company's growth with them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have hoped, in the course of this article, to examine the implication of our individual capability on our Working Journeys and on the talent pools in which we swim. This information needs to be more accessible to our employees and to us in order that we plan our journeys and equip ourselves for the road ahead. To those who manage talent pools, this enables understanding the complex interplay of factors to manage for individual wellbeing and organizational performance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Olivier has had an eclectic career. He is a decorated marine officer, has worked in the corporate world, built a software company, and had two management consultancies. The Southern African management consultancy in 1998 changed its name to bioSS South Africa and in Australia, was bioSS Australia. Olivier works independently and discretely with high-potential individuals, many of whom are well known public figures, advising and coaching them on their journeys and their legacies. He enjoys fine art and owns an art gallery. In 2003 he published *The Working Journey* and is currently working on a new book. He has a strong interest in fighting global poverty and is looking at ways of helping micro entrepreneurs in developing countries.



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The benefits are organizational effectiveness, fulfilled people and organizations designed for value-creation, sustainability and social well-being.

* Note: inspired by the work of Wilfred Brown and Elliott Jaques

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