CAREER STRONG

The 6A's Framework: A Competency-Based Approach to Career Navigation

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Abstract
Career navigation is a distinct, learnable capability, separate from career readiness. The frameworks most widely used to define and teach readiness, including the NACE Career Readiness Framework and U.S. Department of Education employability standards, were built to describe what prepared workers demonstrate at or near the point of hire. They were not built to develop what a worker needs to navigate multiple transitions across a working lifetime, which is now the normal condition of working life in the United States. The 6A's Framework is a competency-based response to that gap. Grounded in research from organizational psychology, social cognitive theory, decision science, social capital theory and adult learning, it identifies six interdependent capabilities: Agency, Awareness, Alignment, Action, Allyship and Agility. Together they define career navigation as a learnable, teachable domain. The framework is offered as a proposal precise enough to be tested, critiqued and built upon. Validation through instrument development, longitudinal outcome studies and cross-population testing remains to be done.

Introduction

Most people are taught how to get a job. Fewer are taught how to manage a career, and until recently that gap was tolerable. A labor market that rewarded tenure and penalized movement made a successful launch the primary challenge. What followed, roughly, took care of itself.

That condition no longer holds. When workers change roles every two to three years and roughly 39 percent of existing skill sets are projected to transform or become obsolete by 2030, a career cannot be treated as a trajectory launched once and sustained.[1][2] Rather, careers are composed of a sequence of decisions, each made in a labor market that looks materially different from the one before it and frequently under financial and emotional pressure.

When careers are seen as sequences of jobs rather than continuous navigation, thinking collapses into isolated moments. People optimize for immediate outcomes rather than trajectory. Under pressure, visible signals like pay and title dominate while less obvious factors,

[1]Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2024). *Number of jobs, labor market experience, and earnings growth: Results from a national longitudinal survey* (USDL-24-1647). U.S. Department of Labor. Tracks the NLSY97 cohort (born 1980–1984) across ages 18 to 36, finding an average of 9.0 jobs held during that period.

[2]World Economic Forum. (2025). *Future of jobs report 2025*. Projects that 39 percent of existing skill sets will transform or become obsolete between 2025 and 2030.

learning potential, skill adjacency, positioning for what comes next, etc. receive little attention. Because feedback is delayed and effects compound gradually, these patterns feel low-risk even when they meaningfully narrow future options.

Career navigation compounds those challenges further. It involves high complexity with many interdependent variables, operates on long time horizons with weak learning signals and offers no way to test alternative paths. The most consequential effects emerge years after the decision. People adapt by simplifying, gravitating toward familiar patterns and prioritizing what is visible. Those adaptations feel reasonable in the moment and quietly constrain what comes next.

The skills required to navigate this environment are specific, learnable and largely untaught. This paper argues that career navigation is a distinct domain of competency, one that is learnable, teachable and overdue for a framework that treats it as such.

1. Why Existing Frameworks Don't Address Career Navigation

The NACE Career Readiness Framework

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) defines career readiness as a set of eight attributes employers expect to see in graduates entering the workforce. The framework labels these competencies, though they describe observable behaviors at hire rather than capabilities developed and applied over time. The framework identifies eight attributes: career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork and technology.[3] It is the most widely adopted employer-facing standard in U.S. higher education, developed through surveys of hiring managers and refined across multiple iterations.

The framework is a reasonable attempt to describe what employers observe in candidates they consider work-ready. That is also its limitation. Designed from the employer vantage point of what workers should demonstrate at hire, it describes behaviors legible in an interview or early employment context. It does not describe the capabilities a worker needs to assess a labor market, evaluate whether a role serves their longer-term trajectory, translate experience across sectors or manage the cognitive demands of a career transition.

Several structural gaps follow from this design. The framework captures a state at a point in time rather than a practice sustained over a career. It includes no attributes for reading the labor market: no equivalent of what might be called workforce literacy, which reflects an assumption that large employers set terms and workers match to them. In a labor market where most activity happens in small and mid-size businesses, where self-employment is structurally

[3]National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2021). *Career readiness competencies: A universal definition*. https://www.naceweb.org

significant and where role definitions shift faster than job titles, that assumption is increasingly inaccurate. The framework also provides no theory of how careers unfold, no account of what workers need during transitions, how skills develop over time or what distinguishes workers who navigate change well from those who do not. The NACE framework catalogs what employers want to see. It does not describe how workers build the capacity to deliver it, sustain it or apply it as careers unfold.[4]

The Department of Education (DOE) career and technical education standards share these structural assumptions. Both NACE and DOE approaches were designed for the entry point, calibrated to employer needs at hire, and neither was built to support the ongoing navigation that follows.

When Career Support Is Built on a Clinical Foundation

The limitations of the NACE framework might matter less if the professionals who support workers were trained differently.

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) sets the standards for counselor training in the United States. Under the 2024 CACREP standards, career counseling is organized as a specialization within a broader counseling identity. Eight foundational areas apply to all counseling programs: counseling and helping relationships, group counseling, human development across the lifespan, social and cultural diversity, research and program evaluation, assessment and testing, career development and professional counseling orientation.[5] Career development is one of eight, weighted alongside clinical assessment, group facilitation and lifespan theory.

The career specialization adds labor market knowledge, career assessment administration and techniques for working with clients across career stages. It does not add training in labor market analysis as a distinct domain of expertise: how to read structural shifts in employment, how to interpret the gap between posted and actual labor market activity, how to help a client evaluate whether a role positions them well for what comes next. The professional pipeline produces counselors trained in therapeutic relationship and psychological intervention. The training system is not designed to produce advisors who are expert in how labor markets actually work.

Of course, many individual counselors develop genuine labor market expertise through practice. The observation here is about what the training system is designed to produce. Career counseling grew from vocational guidance traditions rooted in assessment, matching

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[4]Gray, K. (2025, January). The gap in perceptions of new graduates' competency proficiency and resources to shrink it. *NACE Journal*. Documents a 25 to 30 percent gap between student self-assessment and employer ratings of proficiency across NACE's eight competencies, based on the 2024 Student Survey (n=20,482) and Job Outlook 2025 data (n=237 employer respondents).

[5]Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (2024). 2024 CACREP standards. The eight core curricular areas appear in Section 2: Professional Counseling Identity.

individuals to occupations through instruments designed to classify and sort.[6] That history shaped the credentialing system, which in turn shapes what practitioners learn and how career difficulty gets framed.

When career difficulty is understood primarily as a psychological or developmental readiness problem, structural conditions recede. The worker who struggles becomes a person needing more self-knowledge or emotional support rather than someone operating without adequate tools in a demonstrably difficult environment. Whether this framing systematically locates career difficulty inside the individual rather than in the surrounding conditions is a question the field has not examined with much rigor.

2. The Conditions That Make Career Navigation Hard

Arguing that workers lack adequate tools is only useful if the difficulty they face is structural rather than simply personal. Three conditions in the contemporary labor market make career navigation objectively hard, independent of any individual's preparation or motivation.

Role Volatility

The capabilities required for a given role are changing faster than the vocabulary used to describe it. Independent analysis of job posting data, platform-level skill signals and employer surveys converge on the same finding: roughly a third of what a role requires has changed in the past three years, with significantly higher turnover in the occupations most exposed to AI-driven task transformation.[7] Job titles proliferate while role definitions shift beneath them. In practice, job descriptions are frequently recycled as the people who know the role best have the least time to update postings, so language drifts and the gap between what is written and what is actually required widens over time. A worker who held a particular role five years ago cannot assume that a posting using the same title describes the same work.

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[6]Parsons, F. (1909). Choosing a vocation. Houghton Mifflin. Parsons established the foundational framework of self-knowledge, occupational knowledge and rational matching that shaped vocational guidance through the twentieth century. The development of occupational classification systems and the use of psychometric classification in military assignment during the World Wars further institutionalized this matching approach in counselor training.

[7]Three independent sources converge on this finding. Lightcast. (2024). *The shape of work to come*. Reports approximately 32 percent of skill requirements across occupations changed between 2021 and 2024, with the top quartile of affected roles exceeding 75 percent. LinkedIn Talent Solutions. (2024). *Future of skills report*. Reports skills required for the same job title have changed approximately 25 percent since 2015, with 50 percent change projected by 2027. World Economic Forum. (2025). *Future of jobs report 2025*. Reports 44 percent of workers' core skills are projected to be disrupted within five years.

Information Asymmetry

The labor market workers can see is a subset of the labor market that exists, and the gap is larger than most job seekers understand.

The standard federal measures of labor demand count only posted, externally recruited positions.[8] That leaves out contract work, fractional roles, referral hires and independent work, a category that by some estimates covers 38 percent of the American workforce.[9]

Within traditional employment, the gap between posted and actual hiring activity is also significant. Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) research indicates that employee referrals account for approximately 30 percent of hires while representing only 7 percent of applications, with referred candidates hired at roughly ten times the rate of non-referred applicants.[10] Separately, a substantial majority of employers report opening searches internally before posting any position externally.[11] A worker searching only posted positions is not searching the full market.

Navigation through this environment requires relationship-building, a visible professional reputation and the ability to articulate one's value in non-application contexts, capabilities that existing frameworks do not name, let alone teach.

Decision Complexity

Career decisions sit at an unusual intersection of conditions that decision science has studied separately, each well understood in isolation, but rarely appearing together in such concentration. Consequences are delayed by months or years, making feedback slow and nearly impossible to attribute. The path not taken cannot be seen, which means learning from career decisions is structurally harder than learning from decisions where both outcomes are eventually observable. And the stakes implicate identity, as career choices raise questions

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[8]Bureau of Labor Statistics. (n.d.). *Job openings and labor turnover survey (JOLTS): Methodology*. https://www.bls.gov/jlt/jltdef.htm. The survey covers approximately 21,000 establishments and counts open positions available within 30 days and actively recruiting externally.

[9]Upwork. (2024). Freelance forward economy report. Estimates 64 to 76 million Americans work as independent contractors or freelancers, approximately 38 percent of the workforce. Industry-funded; treat as directional. For peer-reviewed corroboration, see Abraham, K. G., Haltiwanger, J. C., Sandusky, K., & Spletzer, J. R. (2018). Measuring the gig economy: Current knowledge and open issues (NBER Working Paper No. 24950). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://doi.org/10.3386/w24950

[10]Society for Human Resource Management. (2016). SHRM's employee referral programs survey findings. Reports referrals account for approximately 30 percent of hires from approximately 7 percent of applications, with a hire rate of approximately 28.5 percent for referred candidates compared with 2.7 percent for non-referred candidates. The 2016 figures remain the primary published SHRM source; subsequent aggregated industry data from Jobvite, iCIMS and LinkedIn report consistent ranges, and no published SHRM study has materially revised these figures.

[11]LinkedIn Talent Solutions. (2024). *Future of recruiting report*. Documents the share of positions filled through internal mobility or network referral before external posting. Industry source; treat as directional.

about who a person is and who they want to become, which introduces an emotional load with no equivalent in most other high-stakes decisions.[12]

What behavioral economics contributes here is a vocabulary for why these conditions reliably produce poor judgment, and why that failure is not a character flaw. Cognitive bias, the systematic, predictable ways human brains miscalculate under specific conditions, is the operating mechanism. When consequences are distant and uncertain, people discount future states far more steeply than any rational accounting would justify, a pattern Kahneman and Tversky documented across decades of research on decision-making under uncertainty.[13] When the status quo carries identity weight, Samuelson and Zeckhauser's research on status quo bias shows that people cling to it even when alternatives are objectively superior. The bias effect is stronger, not weaker, as the decision's importance increases.[14] When options multiply or the information environment is complex, people fall back on familiar heuristics rather than engaging more carefully, defaulting to inaction or the path of least resistance. Career decisions trigger all three patterns simultaneously. People make poor career decisions because they are operating with cognitive hardware that is not designed for this kind of choice, under exactly the conditions that produce the most systematic error.

This is why motivation and self-knowledge, while necessary, are not sufficient. A person can be fully committed to making a good decision and still have their judgment distorted by identity threat, loss aversion and the compounding uncertainty of long-horizon outcomes. A competency framework that does not account for this has not reckoned with what the decision-making literature actually demonstrates about how these choices get made.

3. The 6A's Framework: Competency Architecture and Research Grounding

The 6A's Framework identifies six competencies for career navigation: Agency, Awareness, Alignment, Action, Allyship and Agility.[15] Before describing each, one structural choice in the framework design is worth making explicit.

The framework is organized around competencies rather than skills or personality traits. Competency-based frameworks describe capabilities that can be learned, practiced and assessed, as distinct from fixed attributes or discrete technical skills.[16] This distinction matters

[12]Lent, R. W., & Brown, S. D. (2013). Social cognitive model of career self-management: Toward a unifying view of adaptive career behavior across the lifespan. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 60(4), 557–568.
[13]Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1979). Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk. *Econometrica*, 47(2), 263–291.

[14]Samuelson, W., & Zeckhauser, R. (1988). Status quo bias in decision making. *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, 1(1), 7–59.

[15] The 6A's concept was originated by Teri Rousseau, Career Strong co-founder. The competency-based framework presented in this paper builds on her contributions.

[16]McClelland, D. C. (1973). Testing for competence rather than for intelligence. *American Psychologist*, 28(1), 1–14.

because the field's existing tools lean heavily toward the latter. Assessments that surface personality type or vocational interest profile treat the individual's orientation toward work as something to be discovered and matched to existing options, not developed. A competency-based model starts from a different premise: that the capabilities required to navigate a career can be built, and that building them is the appropriate goal of career development programs.

The choice for a competency-based framework is also grounded in what research on adult learning shows about how people actually develop new capabilities. Malcolm Knowles' work on andragogy established that adult learners engage most effectively when learning is problem-centered, directly relevant to their current situation and oriented toward outcomes they have a stake in.[17] This is distinct from subject-centered learning organized around a body of knowledge to be acquired. A competency model satisfies those conditions in a way that a stage model or trait inventory cannot: it gives the learner something concrete to build toward, connects directly to the decisions they are actually facing and positions them as agents in their own development rather than subjects of assessment. Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory adds a more precise account of why this matters. Their research establishes that intrinsic motivation, the kind that produces sustained effort and retention rather than compliance, depends on three conditions: a sense of autonomy over one's actions, a sense of growing competence and a sense of connection to something that matters.[18] A framework organized around named, learnable competencies supports all three. Learners can see what they are building, track their own progress and connect the work to real decisions in their lives. That is not incidental to the framework's design. It is the reason a competency model fits this content better than a stage model or trait inventory does.

The intervention effectiveness literature supports this design choice. Spokane and Cruza-Guet's review of career counseling meta-analyses found that interventions combining structured exercises, individualized feedback and decision support produce effect sizes in the moderate range, consistently outperforming unstructured or assessment-only approaches. The implication for program design is specific: the components that make career interventions work are the same components a competency-based model is built to deliver.[19]

Each competency in the framework spans two dimensions. The first is internal: the cognitive and motivational capacity that makes action possible. The second is behavioral: the external practices through which that capacity gets applied. A framework built only around internal

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[17]Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (1998). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (5th ed.). Gulf Publishing.

[18]Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), 54–67.

[19]Spokane, A. R., & Cruza-Guet, M. C. (2005). Holland's theory of vocational personalities in work environments. In S. D. Brown & R. W. Lent (Eds.), *Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work* (pp. 24–41). Wiley. Reviews meta-analytic literature on career intervention effectiveness, reporting effect sizes of approximately .30 to .60 for structured interventions combining written exercises, individualized feedback, occupational information and decision support, compared with passive assessment approaches.

states produces insight without execution, while one built only around behaviors produces activity without direction; career navigation requires both, and the framework is built accordingly.

Agency

Agency is the capacity to take ownership of one's career, to act from intention rather than react to circumstance. It is the foundational competency because the others depend on it: a person who does not believe their career is something they can influence will not invest meaningfully in self-knowledge, will not execute plans and will not build the relationships that are required.

The research foundation sits in Bandura's social cognitive theory, specifically in self-efficacy: the belief in one's capacity to organize and execute the actions required to produce specific outcomes.[20] Self-efficacy is domain-specific and task-specific. It determines whether individuals initiate behavior, persist through obstacles and recover from setbacks. In career contexts, Lent, Brown and Hackett's Social Cognitive Career Theory established that career-specific self-efficacy shapes vocational interests, choices and performance outcomes across populations.[21] A worker with low career-related self-efficacy may possess all the technical skills a role requires and still fail to pursue it, advocate for themselves within it or sustain effort through a search.

Self-efficacy energizes effort, but it does not, on its own, provide direction. Agency also requires what the framework calls target focus: a clear enough sense of where one is headed to make intentional decisions about where to invest effort and why, including why now. The temporal dimension matters: motivation research consistently shows that commitment is stronger when goals are connected to proximate reasons for action, not only to long-term aspiration.[22] The framework deliberately avoids the language of finding one's purpose because open-ended identity questions can undermine rather than build the confidence needed to act. A working target is more useful than a perfected one, and refining it over time is itself part of developing Agency.

Underlying all three dimensions of Agency is a premise that the research supports but that most people have not been taught: motivation is not a fixed trait. Ryan and Deci's work on self-determination established that the same person can be proactive and engaged in one set of conditions and passive or avoidant in another. Motivation responds to structure, feedback and the degree to which a person's basic psychological needs are being met. A worker who feels stuck or unable to act on what they know they should do is operating in conditions that

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[20]Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W. H. Freeman.

[21]Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 45(1), 79–122. Updated in Lent, R. W., & Brown, S. D. (2019). Social cognitive career theory at 25: Empirical status of the interest, choice, and performance models. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 115, 103316.

[22]Steel, P., & König, C. J. (2006). Integrating theories of motivation. *Academy of Management Review*, 31(4), 889–913.

predictably suppress motivation: absent feedback loops, unclear targets and isolation from others who reinforce that the work matters. Those conditions can be changed. That is what building Agency means.

A third dimension of Agency is mindset: the attitudes and perspectives that shape how a person responds to challenge and opportunity. Dweck's research on growth mindset established that individuals who believe their abilities can develop through effort respond to setbacks differently than those who treat ability as fixed: persisting longer, seeking feedback more actively and interpreting difficulty as part of learning rather than evidence of limitation.[23] In career contexts, mindset includes a more specific and practically consequential capability: the capacity to reframe one's history, transferable skills and market signals. Gross's work on cognitive reappraisal, reconstructing the meaning of a situation rather than simply suppressing a response to it, provides the research foundation here.[24] Reframing is a learnable cognitive skill that operates differently from generic optimism. It is particularly consequential in career transitions where the same experience can be accurately described in multiple ways, some of which position the person more effectively than others.

Awareness

Awareness is the capacity for accurate self-knowledge as it applies to career decisions: understanding one's interests, the skills developed through experience and practice and the broader set of influences that shape how career decisions actually get made.

The first two dimensions, interests and skills, have the deepest research foundation in vocational psychology. Holland's theory of vocational types established that congruence between a person's orientation toward work and their environment predicts satisfaction and stability.[25] Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman and Johnson's meta-analysis across 172 studies confirmed that person-job fit (the match between a person's skills and job demands, and between their needs and what a role supplies) is a significant predictor of job satisfaction, organizational commitment and retention.[26]

The third dimension is where Awareness diverges meaningfully from standard self-assessment practice. Beyond interests and skills, career decisions are shaped by values, personality tendencies, relational influences and perceived constraints, including the opinions of people

[23]Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. Random House. For the underlying academic grounding, see Dweck, C. S., & Leggett, E. L. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality. *Psychological Review*, 95(2), 256–273.

[24]Gross, J. J. (1998). The emerging field of emotion regulation: An integrative review. *Review of General Psychology*, 2(3), 271–299.

[25]Holland, J. L. (1997). *Making vocational choices: A theory of vocational personalities and work environments* (3rd ed.). Psychological Assessment Resources.

[26]Kristof-Brown, A. L., Zimmerman, R. D., & Johnson, E. C. (2005). Consequences of individuals' fit at work: A meta-analysis of person-job, person-organization, person-group, and person-supervisor fit. *Personnel Psychology*, 58(2), 281–342.

whose judgment the individual trusts or feels accountable to. Perceived constraints deserve particular attention: they operate whether or not they reflect reality, and they are frequently unexamined. Lent and Brown's work on social cognitive career theory identified perceived barriers as a significant moderator of career behavior, independent of actual environmental conditions.[27] A framework that helps workers examine what they believe is limiting them, and whether those beliefs are accurate, is doing something meaningfully different from one that maps interests to job categories.

A second constraint on self-knowledge is less obvious: some preferences cannot be accurately assessed without direct experience. Research on affective forecasting (the process of predicting how future events will make us feel) shows that people are reasonably good at predicting the direction of their emotional responses but systematically underestimate the intensity of sustained conditions and misidentify what will actually matter once they are living them.[28] Loewenstein's work on the hot-cold empathy gap sharpens this finding in ways directly relevant to career decisions: when a person is in a relatively neutral state, such as reading a job description, conducting a site visit or asking interview questions, they cannot fully access how they will feel once they are inside the environment itself.[29] A culture of passive-aggressive communication or a management style that removes autonomy can be described to someone who has not yet experienced it, but the description will reliably understate the lived reality. This is not a failure of self-reflection. It is a structural feature of how human cognition handles hypothetical states. Self-knowledge built only through introspection will always be incomplete. Awareness, developed as a competency, includes the capacity to design and read experiences deliberately: to treat work situations, stretch assignments and early-stage roles as data about preferences that cannot be fully known in advance.

The dominance of assessment in career support practice follows directly from this assumption: that self-knowledge is discoverable in advance through careful inventory of preferences and traits. The model dates to Frank Parsons' 1909 framework for vocational guidance, which proposed that rational career choice required first a clear understanding of oneself and then a reasoned match to occupational requirements. Parsons' logic has shaped career counseling ever since. It produced the interest inventories, personality typologies and values assessments that remain the primary tools of the field today.

The critique here is not that these instruments lack validity. A comprehensive meta-analysis of nearly a century of research found that interest inventories predict career choice at roughly twice the rate of chance, a meaningful signal across a labor market with hundreds of possible

[27]Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (2000). Contextual supports and barriers to career choice: A social cognitive analysis. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 47(1), 36–49.

[28]Wilson, T. D., & Gilbert, D. T. (2003). Affective forecasting. In M. P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 35, pp. 345–411). Academic Press.

[29]Loewenstein, G. (2005). Hot-cold empathy gaps and medical decision making. *Health Psychology*, 24(Suppl. 4), S49–S56.

directions.[30] The problem is about what happens between the instrument and the person. Assessment results are typically delivered as conclusions: you are this type, these fields fit you, here is your profile. That framing implies a degree of resolution that the research does not support and that the nature of preference itself does not allow. A person rating how much they would enjoy a given kind of work is doing so from outside the experience of doing it. Assessments often capture imagined preference, what someone thinks they will want, but not the revealed preference that emerges from sustained exposure to actual working conditions. The hot-cold empathy gap predicts exactly this: preferences assessed in a neutral state reliably misrepresent preferences in a live one.

An appropriately-used assessment can point in directions worth investigating: surface clusters of interest that warrant real-world testing, flag values worth examining in light of actual role structures and generate hypotheses rather than conclusions. That is a meaningful contribution. The problem is that hypothesis generation requires a follow-on process of deliberate experimentation that the field has not developed equivalent tools to support. Assessments are delivered; what to do with them is largely left to the individual. The 6A's Framework treats Awareness as a capability built through structured attention to real experience over time, rather than as a score to be received from a single instrument administered at a point of decision.

Self-awareness is not a one-time exercise. Self-knowledge relevant to career navigation evolves as skills develop, values shift and circumstances change. This argues for ongoing reflective practice rather than a single assessment at a particular moment, which has direct implications for how Awareness should be taught and how progress should be measured.

Alignment

Alignment is the capacity to connect one's skills and interests to relevant labor market opportunities, and to read the market accurately enough to make that connection intelligently. It has the least precedent in existing frameworks.

Alignment requires what might be called workforce literacy: the ability to read and interpret the labor market across different company types, role structures and employment arrangements, including independent and contract work that falls entirely outside traditional employment categories. Workforce literacy is not generic awareness that the labor market is changing. It is a specific set of capabilities: recognizing when a role's requirements have drifted from its title, identifying which sectors are consolidating versus expanding and understanding how the same job function can mean materially different work at different company sizes and stages. A worker considering a marketing manager role, for instance, is evaluating very different work depending on whether the company has fifty employees or five thousand. The title is identical. The capabilities required, the autonomy available, the trajectory the role positions the worker for and

[30]Hanna, A., & Rounds, J. (2020). How accurate are interest inventories? A quantitative review of career choice hit rates. *Psychological Bulletin*, 146(9), 765–796.

the skills the role will develop are not. A worker who cannot read those distinctions is making a high-stakes decision based on a label.

Alignment also requires active trend awareness, the capacity to recognize how macro-level forces, including technological change, are redefining roles and skill requirements in real time. Autor's work on task-based labor markets establishes that occupations are bundles of tasks rather than stable units, and that automation and augmentation reshape those bundles unevenly across sectors and skill levels.[31] Workers who cannot independently assess where task composition is shifting are making decisions based on outdated assumptions about what a role consists of. Fuller and Raman's research on skills-based hiring documents a related shift: employers are increasingly screening on demonstrated capability rather than credential, which changes both how workers should position their experience and how they should evaluate which capabilities to invest in developing.[32]

The third dimension is skill transferability: understanding which of one's capabilities transfer across contexts, which are durable and which are at risk of obsolescence. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs data provides the structural context, with 39 percent of existing skill sets projected to transform or become obsolete between 2025 and 2030. Underneath that figure is a more useful question for individual workers: which of *their* skills sit in the changing 39 percent and which sit in the durable remainder. That assessment cannot be done from job descriptions alone. It requires the kind of market reading that workforce literacy and trend awareness develop.

The research foundation draws on person-job fit literature extended temporally: fit is not static, and a role that aligns well today may not position the worker advantageously for what comes next. Alignment requires both the self-knowledge that Awareness develops and the active labor market knowledge that no assessment tool provides.

Action

Action is the capacity to translate intention into execution: developing focused plans, implementing them with discipline and maintaining accountability for what those outcomes require.

The planning and execution dimensions draw on Locke and Latham's goal-setting theory: specific, challenging goals combined with feedback produce higher performance than vague or easy ones across a wide range of tasks and populations.[33] Gollwitzer's research on

[31]Acemoglu, D., & Autor, D. (2011). Skills, tasks and technologies: Implications for employment and earnings. In O. Ashenfelter & D. Card (Eds.), *Handbook of labor economics* (Vol. 4B, pp. 1043–1171). Elsevier.

[32]Fuller, J. B., Raman, M., Sage-Gavin, E., & Hines, K. (2023). *Hidden workers: Untapped talent*. Harvard Business School Project on Managing the Future of Work and Accenture.

[33]Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (2002). Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation: A 35-year odyssey. *American Psychologist*, 57(9), 705–717.

implementation intentions added a critical refinement: specifying when, where and how one will act significantly increases follow-through compared to goal-setting alone.[34] Career plans that identify what someone wants to achieve but leave the mechanics of execution unspecified are systematically less likely to be carried out.

The accountability dimension is where Action goes beyond simple planning. Accountability in the framework means taking responsibility for outcomes and maintaining the self-correction loop when execution stalls: recognizing what has gone wrong and adjusting rather than waiting for external feedback that may never arrive. This draws on Zimmerman's work on self-regulated learning, which identified monitoring and self-evaluation as the mechanisms through which learners close the gap between intended and actual performance.[35] In career contexts, this capacity is particularly consequential because the feedback environment is poor by design: application processes return little usable information, timelines are long and the causes of outcomes are often genuinely ambiguous. Accountability as a competency means generating one's own corrective signal rather than depending on the environment to provide it.

The career-specific complication for all three dimensions is that the conditions surrounding a job search or transition reliably undermine execution. Identity threat, financial stress and structural absence of feedback create an environment where even well-designed plans deteriorate. Action in the framework includes the metacognitive capacity to recognize these conditions and manage around them, which is a distinct skill from the planning itself.

Allyship

Allyship is the capacity to build and maintain professional relationships that generate mutual benefit over time, and to communicate one's professional value in ways that allow others to advocate effectively on one's behalf. The term was chosen deliberately over networking because networking has accumulated associations with transactional behavior that research consistently shows to be less effective.

Granovetter's analysis of the strength of weak ties showed that acquaintances (people known less well, whose networks overlap less with one's own) provide more novel labor market information than close contacts because they bridge disconnected social networks.[36] Rajkumar et al.'s study using data from 20 million LinkedIn users confirmed that moderately weak ties are the most valuable for job mobility.[37] Trust and reciprocity research adds that the relationships most likely to generate genuine advocacy are built not on skillful outreach at moments of need

[34]Gollwitzer, P. M. (1999). Implementation intentions: Strong effects of simple plans. *American Psychologist*, 54(7), 493–503.
[35]Zimmerman, B. J. (2000). Attaining self-regulation: A social cognitive perspective. In M. Boekaerts, P. R. Pintrich, & M. Zeidner (Eds.), *Handbook of self-regulation* (pp. 13–39). Academic Press.

[36]Granovetter, M. S. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), 1360–1380.

[37]Rajkumar, K., Saint-Jacques, G., Bojinov, I., Brynjolfsson, E., & Aral, S. (2022). A causal test of the strength of weak ties. *Science*, 377(6612), 1304–1310.

but on demonstrated integrity over time: curiosity, humility and consistent engagement. Authentic communication in Allyship is bidirectional: it includes the capacity to receive support and mentorship, not only to offer it.

The dimension existing frameworks miss most completely is the capacity to construct and communicate a coherent professional narrative that is required to support relationship-building. This is distinct from general communication skills (the ability to write clearly, present confidently or engage with colleagues) which career standards do address. They do not address the more specific capacity to frame one's work history, values and intent in ways that give others the material to advocate effectively. Research on narrative coherence in hiring contexts finds that how a candidate's experiences link together functions as a primary signal of suitability, often carrying as much weight as the underlying qualifications.[38] Savickas' career construction research establishes that individuals who can impose a coherent life theme on their work history show higher career adaptability and are better positioned to manage transitions. This is a result of narrative coherence, the mechanism through which identity and intent become legible to others.[39] This is also where the social capital argument from the previous section becomes practical: a weak tie is only useful if the person holding it knows what to say on your behalf, and a worker who cannot articulate a consistent account of their value cannot be effectively advocated for, regardless of network breadth. Professional social media has raised the stakes further: professional reputation is now a semi-public, ongoing construct requiring active management across a broader and more persistent audience than any previous generation has faced.

Agility

Agility is the capacity to respond effectively to changing conditions, sustain effort through disruption and continue making intentional decisions when circumstances shift in ways that were not anticipated.

Savickas's Career Construction Theory and the Career Adapt-Abilities framework provide the primary research foundation, identifying four dimensions of career adaptability: concern for the future, a sense of control over one's career, curiosity about possibilities and confidence under conditions of challenge. Rudolph et al.'s meta-analysis across 13 countries confirmed that

[38]Ibarra, H., & Barbulescu, R. (2010). Identity as narrative: Prevalence, effectiveness, and consequences of narrative identity work in macro work role transitions. *Academy of Management Review*, 35(1), 135–154.

[39]Savickas, M. L. (2005). The theory and practice of career construction. In S. D. Brown & R. W. Lent (Eds.), *Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work* (pp. 42–70). Wiley. For the corresponding measurement work, see Savickas, M. L., & Porfeli, E. J. (2012). Career Adapt-Abilities Scale: Construction, reliability, and measurement equivalence across 13 countries. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 80(3), 661–673.

career adaptability predicts career satisfaction and work engagement with consistent effect sizes across populations and cultural contexts.[40]

Resilience is a necessary component of Agility, but not a sufficient one. Savickas's framework makes this distinction precise: career adaptability requires not only recovery but what he terms "concern," an active, planful orientation toward the future. A worker who bounces back without a sense of where they are going next has recovered but not adapted.

Decision-making under uncertainty is treated as a discrete component of Agility because career transitions are precisely the conditions under which human judgment is most vulnerable to systematic error. Kahneman's work on decision-making under uncertainty and Thaler and Sunstein's research on status quo bias and loss aversion document how cognitive patterns that function well in stable environments produce predictable failures when circumstances change rapidly.[41] Agility includes the capacity to recognize these patterns in one's own reasoning, to distinguish productive persistence from sunk-cost attachment and to exercise appropriate caution with fear-driven avoidance. The cognitive reappraisal capacity introduced under Agency appears here as well: reconstructing the meaning of a setback is as relevant to sustaining momentum through a difficult transition as it is to framing one's history for a new audience.

On Interdependence

The six competencies are not a checklist. They are co-constitutive: each one both requires and reinforces the others in ways that matter for how the framework should be taught and assessed. Agency underwrites the motivation to develop the other five. Awareness provides the self-knowledge that Alignment and Allyship both depend on. Action without Awareness produces misdirected effort. Allyship without Agency produces passive relationship-building that generates little. Agility without the others is adaptability without direction.

Deficits compound in the same way. A person with low Agency will underinvest in Awareness, which will undermine Alignment, which will produce unfocused Action, which will weaken the quality of Allyship, which will reduce the feedback and relationships that would otherwise support Agility. The framework is most useful when treated as a system rather than a set of independent development targets, which matters for how programs built on it should be sequenced and assessed. Learners do not, however, enter the framework at the same point. Knowles' andragogical principle that adult learners bring prior experience and existing competencies to any learning context suggests that a fixed sequence is neither necessary nor always appropriate. A late-career professional with clear direction may have well-developed Agency and Awareness but underdeveloped Allyship; someone earlier in their career may face

[40]Rudolph, C. W., Lavigne, K. N., & Zacher, H. (2017). Career adaptability: A meta-analysis of relationships with measures of adaptivity, adapting responses, and adaptation results. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 98, 17–34.
[41]Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Thaler, R. H., & Sunstein, C. R. (2008). *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*. Yale University Press.

the reverse. The framework functions as a diagnostic as much as a sequence: identifying where investment is most needed rather than prescribing a fixed path through the competencies.

4. What Needs to Happen Next

The 6A's Framework is a working model, actively refined through ongoing program delivery and participant feedback, rather than a fixed theoretical proposal. The competencies described here have been developed iteratively, tested against the decisions participants are actively navigating and adjusted where practice has revealed gaps or imprecision, which is a different epistemic basis than armchair theory, even without formal validation. A formally validated instrument, one with published psychometric properties, longitudinal outcome data and cross-population testing, remains to be developed. That work is what this section describes.

The Framework Needs to Be Tested

The most immediate research need is measurement. The six competencies are defined conceptually and grounded in adjacent research literature, but the framework does not yet have validated instruments for assessing each one as the framework defines it. Existing measures, such as Savickas's Career Adapt-Abilities Scale, Bandura's self-efficacy scales and Holland's vocational inventories, assess constructs that overlap with individual competencies but were not designed to measure the full architecture the framework describes, nor the relationships among competencies that the interdependence argument depends on. Developing and validating instruments specific to the 6A's Framework is the foundational research task.

Longitudinal outcome studies are the second priority. The central claim of the framework requires longitudinal data to test: that these six competencies constitute career navigation capability, and that developing them produces better outcomes across repeated transitions. Cross-sectional studies can establish whether the competencies correlate with outcomes at a point in time. They cannot establish whether building them causes better navigation over a working lifetime, which is the claim the framework makes. Studies that follow individuals across multiple transitions, measuring competency levels and tracking outcomes including transition quality, time to employment, career satisfaction and earnings trajectory, would provide the evidence base the framework currently lacks.

Cross-population testing is the third research need. The framework was developed in and for the U.S. labor market, and the research base it draws on skews toward college-educated populations in Western institutional contexts. Nothing in the competency definitions requires a college credential: the capabilities described are logically applicable across educational backgrounds, career stages and employment arrangements. But whether the framework holds across these populations, and whether the competencies require different developmental approaches for different groups, are empirical questions rather than assumptions the framework can make. The same applies to geographic scope: labor market structures, cultural

norms around professional relationships and institutional career support vary enough across national contexts that cross-cultural validity cannot be assumed.

The Framework Needs to Be Used by Others

A competency framework demonstrates its value partly through uptake: whether other researchers, program designers and educators find it useful enough to build on, test and critique. The 6A's Framework is offered here as a structure others can work with, not as a proprietary system. If the competencies are useful, they should be testable by programs and researchers with no connection to their origin. If they are not useful (if practitioners building career development curricula find the constructs poorly defined, the boundaries between competencies unclear or the research grounding insufficient), that feedback is itself valuable information about what the framework gets wrong.

This is also where the counselor training argument from Section II becomes a practical question rather than a structural critique. If career navigation is a learnable capability describable as competencies, then the professionals who support individuals in developing those competencies need training organized around those competencies, not around therapeutic relationship models that were built for different problems. Whether that implies revisions to existing credentialing standards, new training pathways or entirely different models of career support is a question that practitioners, institutions and researchers are better positioned to answer than any single framework paper can. The framework's contribution is to sharpen the question by making explicit what career navigation actually requires.

5. Conclusion

Career navigation is a learnable capability. Readiness, as existing standards define it, is a state described at a single point in time. Navigation is the capacity to make decisions across a working lifetime under conditions that produce systematic error. The conditions that make navigation difficult, role volatility, information asymmetry, the cognitive demands of high-stakes decisions under uncertainty, are structural and persistent. They will not resolve as workers gain more experience or self-knowledge. They require specific capabilities that can be named, taught and developed over time.

The frameworks currently available to workers and the programs that support them were designed for a different problem: how to match individuals to roles at a point in time, as legibly as possible to employers who set the terms. That was a reasonable design given the labor market conditions that produced it. It is an increasingly poor fit for the conditions workers actually face.

The 6A's Framework is an attempt to describe what navigation capability looks like when it is built for the problem workers actually have. Resume review, interview preparation and career

counseling retain value at specific moments. Agency, Awareness, Alignment, Action, Allyship and Agility are an attempt to describe the underlying capabilities that determine whether those supports produce lasting benefit or only temporary assistance. A worker who develops genuine Agency, reads the labor market with Alignment, builds relationships through Allyship and sustains effort through Agility is not dependent on any particular support system. That is the point.

The cost of continuing without this capability is not small. Investment continues in approaches calibrated to a labor market that no longer exists, while workers move through an increasingly complex one without adequate tools. Losses are distributed across millions of individual careers rather than concentrated in any institutional or governmental mandate. A person who can't read the labor market, articulate their value or build the relationships that produce referrals doesn't experience that as a policy failure. They experience it as a personal one. The 6A's Framework is offered as a step toward making them visible.

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