



The 6A's Framework: A Practitioner's Guide

Why A Framework At All

Career navigation has no shared standard of practice. Talk to a hundred career advisors and you will get a hundred approaches to a resume, a hundred theories of what a job search requires and a hundred definitions of a good fit. Many help the people they work with, but when practitioners improvise their own method, there is no way to define what good practice is, train someone to deliver it or measure whether it worked.

A field that cannot measure what works cannot improve, and the evidence reflects it. With the exception of programs that place people directly into jobs, there is little to suggest that what advisors and coaches do produces lasting effect: research consistently shows career program impacts tend to be small and short-term, with little evidence of long-term benefits.

Some might think that career navigation is not complex enough to need this kind of rigor. And perhaps it wasn't needed in the past, because the labor market offered stable and long-lasting work with a single employer. That market is gone. Workers now move through roles and skill requirements that shift faster than the titles describing them, and managing a career through that has become its own demanding work.

Career navigation is a discipline that has never been recognized as one: an organized body of knowledge with shared methods, concepts and standards for producing, evaluating and teaching it. A challenge this consequential needs what any discipline provides, a defined body of practice, a way to tell better from worse and a way to teach it. The closest thing to a standard the field has produced does not fill the gap. The career frameworks used in education and workforce programs, often proposed as quality benchmarks, are checklists calibrated to what a candidate should demonstrate at the point of hire. They do not teach anyone the capability to navigate a career over time.

Every other domain that builds complex adult capability, from nursing to the skilled trades, does so using competency-based education (CBE). In CBE, progress is measured by demonstrating defined competencies, each composed of specific skills a person can learn and demonstrate. CBE is the standard across disciplines of adult learning because it fits how adults learn. They build capability fastest when working on a real problem in front of them with a stake in the outcome, which is exactly the position of someone facing a career decision. Career navigation is overdue for the same treatment we already give every other field we take seriously.

The 6A's Framework brings that treatment to career navigation by defining its competencies.

What The Framework Is

The 6A's Framework identifies six interdependent competencies that together determine whether a person can make good career decisions across a working lifetime: Agency, Awareness, Alignment, Action, Allyship and Agility. It is grounded in research from organizational psychology, social cognitive theory, decision science, social capital theory and adult learning. Each competency is defined conceptually, traced to its research base and described with skills that can be taught, practiced and developed over time.

That last point is what distinguishes the model from the fixed-trait approach implied by personality and vocational interest assessments that dominate much of career advising. These assessments suggest success is based on traits to be discovered and matched to existing options. A competency model starts from the opposite premise: that the capabilities career navigation requires can be developed, and that developing them is the work. Each competency spans two dimensions. One is internal: the understanding, motivation and judgment that make sound action possible. The other is behavioral: the practices through which that understanding gets applied. The framework defines each competency across both, because internal development without practice stays inert and practice without it stays undirected.

The Six Competencies

Agency is the ability to take ownership of one's career and 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 in self-knowledge, execute plans or build the relationships that opportunity runs through. A person with developed Agency can articulate a working career target specific enough to guide proximate decisions, sustain motivation through conditions that predictably suppress it and reframe setbacks and history as material to learn from rather than evidence of limitation.

Awareness is accurate self-knowledge as it applies to career decisions: interests, the skills developed through experience and the wider set of influences that shape how decisions actually get made, including values, perceived constraints and the judgment of people whose opinion carries weight. A person with developed Awareness can distinguish which of their capabilities are transferable across contexts and which are situational. They can separate imagined preference from the preference that only emerges through direct experience. And they treat self-knowledge as something built through structured attention over time, rather than received from a single instrument at a moment of decision.

Alignment has the least precedent in existing frameworks. It is the ability to connect one's skills and interests to relevant labor market opportunities and to read the market accurately enough to make that connection well. A person with developed Alignment can recognize when a role's requirements have drifted from its title and read how the same job function means materially different work at a fifty-person company than at a five-thousand-person one. They can locate their own skills against where the market is moving: which are durable, which are transferable and which are at risk. Workforce literacy is a specific capability rather than a general sense that the market is changing.

Action is the ability to translate intention into execution: focused planning, disciplined implementation and accountability for outcomes. A person with developed Action can specify when, where and how they will act, not only what they want to achieve. They generate their own corrective signal when external feedback is poor or absent, which in a job search it almost always is. The harder dimension is staying on a plan when the search itself works against it. A job search erodes execution in predictable ways: it threatens identity, applies financial pressure and returns almost no feedback. Building the plan is one skill. Holding to it and correcting course under those conditions is another, and it is the one that more often decides the outcome.

Allyship is the ability to build professional relationships that create mutual benefit over time, and to communicate one's value so that others can advocate effectively. The term was chosen over networking deliberately, because the relationships that produce genuine advocacy are built on consistent engagement and demonstrated integrity, not on transactional outreach at the moment of need. The relationship-building dimension runs on curiosity and reciprocity rather than need, and it includes receiving support, not only offering it. The communication dimension is the one existing frameworks miss most completely: constructing a coherent professional narrative that gives others the material to advocate, and treating professional reputation as the semi-public, ongoing thing it has become. A weak tie is only useful if the person holding it knows what to say on your behalf.

Agility is the ability to keep making sound decisions when conditions change in ways that were not anticipated. Resilience is necessary here but not sufficient. A person who bounces back without a sense of where they are going has recovered but not adapted, so Agility includes sustaining a planful orientation toward the future through disruption, not only absorbing the shock of it. The dimension that matters most is decision-making itself, under exactly the conditions that most distort it. Career transitions are when human judgment is most vulnerable to systematic error, and a person with developed Agility can recognize those patterns in their own reasoning: telling productive persistence from sunk-cost attachment, and warranted caution from fear-driven avoidance.

Summary

The six are co-constitutive rather than sequential. Agency underwrites the motivation to develop the others. Awareness supplies the self-knowledge that Alignment and Allyship both depend on. Deficits compound the same way strengths reinforce: low Agency suppresses investment in Awareness, which undermines Alignment, which produces unfocused Action. The framework is most useful when treated as a system rather than a set of independent targets, and it does not require a fixed order. Learners enter at different points, with some competencies further developed than others, and a program built on it should meet that unevenness rather than assume a common starting point.

The 6A's Framework is a working model. The competencies are defined conceptually and grounded in adjacent research. Validated instruments, longitudinal outcome studies and cross-population testing remain to be done, and the framework is offered as a proposal precise enough to be tested, critiqued and built on rather than as a finished standard. The full whitepaper, with research citations and licensing details, is at getcareerstrong.com/6as-framework.