
The Mindset That Fosters Career Agility



By Antoine Tirard , (INSEAD MBA '97D), Founder, NexTalent, and Claire Harbour , (INSEAD MBA '92J), Founder, Culture Pearl

Six personal factors can smooth the process of career change.

In the 1990s, when Subhanu Saxena was about to be promoted PepsiCo's CFO in Africa, a higher-up asked him if he would consider going to Russia instead. Accepting meant he would shift to a line role for the first time, on a turnaround assignment, no less. "I asked the organisation to just show me I wouldn't get shot at," he said. Once his wife gave the green light, the Indian-born and British-educated executive moved his family to Moscow.

Amid change, some people just feel in their element. An engineer by training, Saxena started as an investment banker and switched to consulting after earning an MBA at INSEAD. He then joined PepsiCo before turning to the pharmaceutical industry, eventually leading Cipla, India's third largest drug maker. He now runs a private equity firm and is involved with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Some may find the breadth of such a career almost dizzying. We like to think of Saxena as a model of career agility.

In our forthcoming book, *[Disrupt Your Career: How to Navigate Uncharted Career Transitions and Thrive](#)*, we tell the stories of 44 global leaders, including Saxena, who have mastered the art of career transition. Building on these interviews and the work of eminent career development researchers such as [Mark L. Savickas](#), we have identified six success factors that facilitate career remodelling.

The 6 Cs

The following six personal attributes can help you foster career agility. The good news is that one doesn't need to have all six to be a career transition ninja. Everyone can capitalise on their own strengths. What are yours?

1. Commitment

Commitment implies that you are dedicated to the process of managing your career and are willing to take action to create change. The first step is to set aside time to probe your options and examine them with care and focus. By anticipating the moves you could make, you are more likely to make better choices.

2. Control

Control is the extent to which you are in charge of your own career decisions. You can build a more exciting career by being conscientious about it, as opposed to relying on chance. Be disciplined and deliberate when choosing your goals, then create the conditions to achieve them. No excuses entertained.

3. Curiosity

Curiosity means that you enjoy exploring the world of work and learning about roles and their requirements. As your possibilities are somewhat bounded by what you know, better information naturally expands your opportunities. Seek new experiences as a way to discover careers that fit your personality and talents.

4. Change agility

Change agility is your natural level of comfort in new or unsettling situations. Some people are more tolerant of uncertainty and can handle it well. Valuing new perspectives and viewing problems as opportunities will increase your

creativity, resourcefulness and self-confidence, setting the stage for career change.

5. Connections

Connections represent your network and the efforts you make to meet new people. To succeed at networking, you must perceive all conversations as learning opportunities, not only those conversations relating to careers. You must start with a desire to initiate relationships and invest in them over time. Do not limit your circle – reach far and wide.

6. Confidence

Confidence is the faith you have in your ability to make and carry out wise career decisions. Switching careers usually involves some challenges. Do you trust that you will overcome obstacles that might appear on your path? The key is to stay optimistic and realise that resilience can be built.

These 6 Cs consist of a broad range of knowledge, values, skills and abilities. While some of these elements may be innate, others, such as change agility or connections, can be improved. Whether you are contemplating a career change in the short term or not, you would do well to boost your capacity to navigate professional transitions skilfully. It's a well-known fact that today's careers aren't as linear as they used to be.

Real-life career transition tips

We asked Saxena what advice he would give people considering a career shift. Here's what he had to say.

"The three things I'd ask them to keep in mind would be first, enjoy the adventure. A transition is a fantastic opportunity that is presented to you, so try to really look at it as life-enriching experience. If you regard it as a stepping stone that can have monumental consequences on your career, you're putting way too much pressure on yourself," he said.

His second bit of advice would be to carefully consider how you will spend the first three months in your new environment. He emphasised the importance of getting to know the people and also letting them know you in return, so that they can see the value you bring.

His third advice would be to seek the early ‘wins’ as a way to build self-confidence and also reassure the organisation that it has made the right move by bringing you on board. “If I were to add one more thing, it would be: Have fun. There will be challenges, but transitions, whether chosen or enforced, will really enrich your outlook,” he said. Reminiscing about the time he moved to Moscow with his wife and two young daughters, he shared that it was “two of the best years of our lives”.

Antoine Tirard is a talent management advisor and the founder of NexTalent. He is the former head of talent management of Novartis and LVMH.

Claire Harbour-Lyell is a coach and global talent expert, the founder of Culture Pearl and a speaker, consultant and writer about all things to do with optimising talent across borders.

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/mindset-fosters-career-agility>

About the author(s)

Antoine Tirard is an international talent management consultant, trainer and coach to large global organisations.

Claire Harbour is a global talent expert, focused on coaching and consulting across borders, and stirring up disruption.