

*Introduction*  
*Career Transitions in Expert Performers*

*Expertise* is generally defined as the capacity to produce superior performance in a domain as agreed by expert representatives for the domain or by an established measure of expertise. A concert pianist, a Wimbledon champion, a Nobel laureate scientist, an accomplished Shakespearian actor, a famous sculptor, a successful politician are all experts in their domains. Indeed, there are expert “tinkers, tailors, soldiers, and sailors,” in the words of the nursery rhyme. Expertise is not a fleeting phenomenon but rather a steady reproducible demonstration of one’s ability. You are an expert tennis player when you break through the qualifying rounds of Wimbledon, Roland Garros, or Flushing Meadows. You are an expert chess player when you attain an Elo rating of 2000 or higher. You are an expert lawyer when you attain partnership in a law firm.

*Transition* is usually defined as the process of moving from one stable state to another. Transitions are sometimes constant, sometimes volatile; sometimes gradual, sometimes abrupt; sometimes short-lived, sometimes taking place over an extended period of time. They describe movements in everything including careers, changes in living situations, and changes in life stages – for example, moving into adolescence or changes in sexual identity. They are not considered to be an end state but rather a movement from one steady state to another. While all transitions are intriguing, our study focused specifically on the study of career transitions.

*Transition Expertise*, the object of this study, is slightly oxymoronic. Expertise is generally considered to be a relatively homeostatic or stable state. It is achieved over time through a combination of ability, training, dedication, and sometimes good fortune. Transition on the other hand is an unstable, nonhomeostatic state: a change in careers, a dropping of old patterns to adopt new ones, dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty, moving from a homeostatic state into a nonhomeostatic state. But in this apparent conflict resides the objective of this book and, consequently, its particular value. Transition Expertise can be defined as *the skills and*

*abilities to manage oneself, one's performance, and one's environment in ways that produce repeated and successful transitions in the nonhomeostatic periods between one homeostatic stage or position to another.* This book focuses specifically on career transitions. In initiating this study, our objectives were clear: We wanted to discover why some individuals made repeated successful transitions in their fields from performers to coaches/managers to leaders and chiefs in their field. What is it that characterizes or is acquired by individuals who are consistently able to make successful transitions in a way that sets them apart from their peers? Can the key components of Transition Expertise be identified and measured? Is there such a thing as a transition expert? And how are career transitions accompanied by, indeed central to, the formative adaptations in identity and an evolving self concept (both of which have generally been overlooked in the study of expertise itself)?

### 1.1 Pursuit of Expertise

The pursuit of expertise extends uninterrupted throughout the world history. In the West, Socrates and Plato sought to elicit the highest standards of ethics in young leaders while the Sophists taught excellence in oratory and the law. The medieval guild system developed its expertise hierarchy of Novice, Initiate, Apprentice, Journeyman, Expert, and Master. The universities in the Middle Ages developed a curriculum of *trivium* (Latin, rhetoric, and logic) and *quadrivium* (arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, and music) to educate and promote expert scholarship. The systemization of knowledge by the Encyclopedists and the music guilds of Baroque Germany are illustrations of the pursuit of expertise in the Enlightenment. The reintroduction of the Olympic Games by de Coubertin sought excellence in body and mind. All of these systems sought to produce expert performance in individuals.

In the East, Chinese philosopher Confucius proposed the then revolutionary concept that administrative appointments, sources of great power, should be decided because of merit, virtue, and honesty, not of nobility of blood. This set the stage for administrative meritocracy, whereby anyone could become a government officer in Imperial China as long as they passed a set of challenging but fair examinations. In Japan, the concept of Shu-Ha-Ri, originating in the tea ceremony and the performing arts and later applied to the martial arts, describes the path to mastery by three stages of learning. In Shu (守, "protect"), the apprentices learn the techniques exactly as taught by the master. In Ha (破, "detach"), they reflect

on the meaning of what they have learnt and explore changes of the techniques. Finally, in Ri (離, “leave”), the students, now practitioners, must go beyond the traditional teaching and think in an innovative way.

Three studies in the second half of the twentieth century set the benchmark for studying expertise. Anne Roe (1952) interviewed leading scientists in the United States to identify what characterized individuals who were the best in their field. Harriet Zuckerman (1977) interviewed American Nobel laureates, focusing on how future laureates found study opportunities, worked with expert mentors, and were socialized into the world of the scientific elite. Benjamin Bloom’s (1985) study of talent identified how gifted young people developed to their full potential in adulthood. It was conducted across several domains: (1) athletic or psychomotor talent, using Olympic swimmers and world class tennis players; (2) aesthetic, musical, and artistic talent, using concert pianists and sculptors; and (3) cognitive talent, working with research mathematicians and research neurologists.

Expertise research has also been vibrant in cognitive psychology and cognitive science, with three lines of research having been particularly influential: the *classic expertise approach* (Gobet, 2020; Richman et al., 1996; Simon & Chase, 1973), which identifies key mechanisms from the study of chess and physics novices and experts; the *expert performance approach* (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993; Ericsson & Smith, 1991), which studies the characteristics of experts’ training and practice in great detail; and the *mental model* paradigm, which emphasizes the role of knowledge structures such as frames and schemata (Minsky, 1975; Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977). This book will repeatedly draw on these lines of research.

## 1.2 Transitions among Expert Performers

We decided to focus on a particular group of people in this book: experts who make repeated successful career transitions through their careers up to senior positions in their field of expertise. All the transition experts in this study met three main criteria – expertise in a domain, careers in the same field as their primary expertise, and repeated successful career transitions to very senior levels in their field. We conducted an in-depth cross-domain study with leaders in business, sport, and music who had made repeated successful transitions to very senior levels in their fields: traders who became bank group vice-presidents; automotive engineers who became chief executive officers; football players who became managers of teams; yachtsmen who became *chefs d’équipe* of Olympic teams; musicians

who became heads of faculty and principals of conservatoires. Their stories of their career transitions are fascinating in themselves, coming, as they do, from such leaders in their fields. And we have unabashedly drawn upon them and their verbatim descriptions of their experience to enrich the book and to make the theory accessible to the reader. Our research was underpinned by major models for career development and theories of personal intelligence, generative intelligence, cognitive adaptability, and motivational theory. We also examined how identity adapted and changed during the course of a transition. We followed the evolution of self-concept as individuals progressed through their careers.

Participants in the study often pursued varying paths through their careers. Individuals sometimes traversed different arenas of expertise: For example, musicians drew upon sporting experience, business people drew upon sports experience, or sports people drew upon business experience. Expertise is associated with a specific domain so that you can be an expert clarinetist or financial trader or fencer. Within a domain, you can have different types of expertise – for example, an expert football player, an expert coach, an expert referee, or an expert manager.

### 1.3 Content of the Book

Chapter 1, “Introduction,” is this chapter and provides an overview of the complete book. Part I, Transitions, has three chapters that address the nature of career transitions and provide some background on expertise. Chapter 2, “Career Stage Transitions,” briefly reviews the most relevant of the multitudinous theories of career development and identity and the common patterns shared by these theories for the major career stages. We present a six-stage career model with five transitions and show how this model corresponds with and differs from previous literature on work career stages. Chapter 3, “The Expert Transition Cycle,” focuses on the transition processes that individuals go through when making a transition between the career stages identified in the previous chapter. We present the basic expert transition process model of intention, inquiry, exploration, commitment, and integration. Chapter 4, “Intelligence, Cognition, and Expertise,” provides a brief high-level review of theories of intelligence, cognition, and expertise in operation during transitions.

Part II of the book, Transition Expertise, presents the main cognitive elements that are used in transition expertise to be studied in this project. Chapter 5, “Cognitive Flexibility,” addresses the nature of cognitive processes that alternatively limit or enable individuals to adapt to change when

they make a transition. Chapter 6, “Generative Intelligence,” addresses how induction, inference, analogy, and metaphor enable individuals to generalize experience from one career stage or domain to another. Chapter 7, “Personal Intelligences,” addresses intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences and the role they play in enabling an individual to manage their internal learning process and their relations with others during transitions. Chapter 8, “Contextual Intelligence,” integrates aspects of practical and social intelligences into a clear model for understanding and managing the environment into which an individual transitions.

Part III of the book, Motivation, addresses the specific question of how motivation operates during transitions and how different types of motivation influence the repeated success of transitions. Chapter 9, “Motivation,” addresses the main motivational theories as they relate to transition, in particular, achievement motivation, challenge and competition, the role of cognitive attributions in motivation, and the influence of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. Chapter 10, “Purpose,” was initially investigated within the general area of motivation. But upon review of the responses of the participants in the study, we decided to differentiate purpose from the other intrinsic motivations as it seemed to reflect something that was unique to humans.

Part IV, The Project of the Self, returns to the beginning of the book and revisits transitions in light of the study findings. Chapter 11, “Identity,” references back to Chapter 3 and the Expert Transition Cycle model. It addresses how identity adapts and changes as individuals explore and commit to new identities during the course of a particular transition. Chapter 12, “Self Concept,” references back to Chapter 2 and the six career stages and five transition stages between them. It investigates how self concept evolves over the course of the career through the use of the Transition Expertises.

Chapter 13, “Conclusion,” summarizes the findings of the book and discusses future research opportunities.

Appendices consist of Appendix 1, which delineates the methodology of the study underpinning this book, and Appendix 2, which looks further into unsuccessful transitions.

#### 1.4 Further Comments

Career cycles and career transitions have been widely studied. Life transitions have also been the subject of considerable research, ranging from adolescence to marriage to geographical moves to death and dying. However, surprisingly little research has been conducted on the actual cognitive

processes that contribute to successful transitions in careers. In particular, there has been no systematic study of how these processes might develop over time, interact, or aggregate into an interactive whole that contributes to repeated success in making career transition.

The scope of the project was large – for example, from generative intelligence to motivation to self concept, from football players to opera singers to mechanical engineers. This was intentional as we sought to expand our knowledge. Our objective has been to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the nature and operation of what we call *Transition Expertise*. We believe this study has done that. It has confirmed a variety of models and a number of our own hypotheses. It has challenged others. It has raised a number of questions. We believe this is indicative of a “good” project.

While we have taken a largely cognitive perspective on the nature of Transition Expertise, we relied on various trait models to understand the operation of intelligence. And we also placed a strong emphasis on motivation. While there is an argument that motivation should have been addressed first before moving onto the types of expert process operative during transitions – and indeed might be of personal interest to the reader – we decided to first address expertise and the way it operates during transitions. Equally, we understood how embedded individuals are in their environmental context and how this influences not only how they make transitions but also how they build their identity and self concept. We came to understand that Transition Expertise was not a static collection of processes and abilities but operated differently at different career transitions and in different contexts. We discovered how the different elements we studied would interact and develop over time into something called “Transition Expertise.” We initially considered the role of resilience, self-efficacy beliefs, personal agency, and the development of wisdom over the course of a career. But in the end we decided that these were the subject of another book.

In our research, we found ourselves constantly reverting to well-established, highly recognized, but at times older sources written by the classical thought leaders in the fields we investigated. Their application has stood the test of time. Where there are more contemporary substantive contributions in the field, of course, these sources have been acknowledged and their impact on understanding the application of theories and models integrated into our research. However, we have not explored divergent paths that are not applicable for the kind of interview and content analysis approach undertaken in this study.

We are extremely grateful to all of the participants in the study who gave their time and insight and who allowed us to run alongside them for a while as they described their journey through the course of their lives and careers. The book is full of verbatim quotations from them in which they describe their personal experiences of navigating the important career transitions in their lives. In some instances, we have quoted the same statement from an individual to illustrate different Transition Expertises. Their telling of their stories could not be simplistically parsed but rather represents the complex and sophisticated nature of their thoughts and actions as individuals drew upon multiple aspects of their abilities to successfully make a transition. We were touched and inspired by the stories of their career journeys and hope that the readers will see beyond the theories to their essence: the characteristics, attributes, abilities, and goodwill of all those who took part in our study. Their stories are remarkable examples of the full use of their potential in the pursuit of excellence and serve to remind us all of what we might achieve in our own lives.

