

# An Agile-Based Framework for Enhancing Career Building: A Critical and Insightful Analysis

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## Abstract

The dynamism and depth of the contemporary labor markets require that an individual develop careers with an adaptability, itself iterative, strategic responsiveness of the manner by which organizations address complex projects. The paper is a critical analysis of whether agile methodology, which was originally designed to be applied to the software development sphere, can be utilized to the field of individual career building. This paper relies on modern ideas of career development, human capital, self-determination, and organizational learning to present an Agile Career Development Framework (ACDF) as a set of five phases, which are Sprint Planning, Skill Sprints, Retrospective Review, Stakeholder Feedback, and Career Backlog Management. The framework combines the concepts of Scrum, Kanban and Lean thinking with conventional models of career development, such as the Life-Span Theory of Super, RIASEC model of Holland, and Career Anchors of Schein. A critical evaluation of the constraints of the traditional linear career development models shows how poorly they can deal with the non-linear, disruption realities of modern day employment. The suggested framework provides a framework but loose system according to which individuals can develop competencies in a structured but flexible way, shifting their career paths and staying adaptive to the changes in labor market requirements. The paper also questions the socioeconomic and equity issues of universalizing an agile model to career building because it recognizes structural obstacles, which can limit the relevance of the model. Career counseling implications, implications on the educational institutions, implications on the human resource professionals, and implications on individual learners are addressed.

**Keywords:** agile methodology, career development, Scrum, career building framework, iterative learning, human capital, career resilience

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## Introduction

The modern world of work is becoming more uncertain, disruptive in terms of technology, and its competitive forces continue to obsolesce traditional skills at a faster rate. The emergence of artificial intelligence, gig jobs, and globalization of the labor market have radically redefined what it takes to establish and maintain a career. As stated by both scholars and practitioners, the classical career development models, which are based on the linear career growth, the stability of the institution, and long-term organizational commitment, are becoming poorly synchronized with the current reality of employment (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Sullivan and Baruch, 2009). To this, this paper will argue that agile methodology, a paradigm whose initial applications were designed to function in the software development

environment, has the potential to present an attractive and theoretically informed perspective on redefining career building in the 21st century.

Agile methodology is an approach that developed at the beginning of the 2000s in response to the mainstream, disjointed software development cycles. In 2001, Agile Manifesto was written by a group of software practitioners, and it presented a list of values and principles based on the flexibility, collaboration, iterative steps, and responsiveness to change (Beck et al., 2001). Since its introduction, agile thinking has found its way into various disciplines such as project management, organizational design, marketing as well as education. Still, its systematic use in terms of personal career development is not thoroughly covered in the academic literature.

The paper aims to address this gap by critically examining the theoretical underpinnings, practice and socioeconomic implications of an agile based career development framework. The paper undergoes a number of steps: the review of the existing theories of career development; the critique of their weaknesses; the description of a proposed Agile Career Development Framework (ACDF); the critical examination of its assumptions and limitations; and the discussion of the implications to various stakeholder groups.

### **Theoretical Foundations of Career Development**

#### **Classical Career Development Models**

The career development theory has changed significantly in the last century. The initial theories such as that of Frank Parsons (1909) trait-and-factor theory, conceptualized career decision as a rational matching process between personal characteristics and job demands. Although this is a foundational model, it has been highly criticized due to its strict deterministic and in many ways, a static assumption (Sharf, 2013). It assumes a fixed situation and single decision point in career choices which makes it mostly irrelevant to the modern job dynamic situations.

With this theory, Donald Super proposed the concept of developmental complexity through his Life-Span, Life-Space Theory (1980) of career development, which regards career development as a lifetime process in several forms and phases; growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and disengagement. The concept of the career rainbow presented by Super provided a more in-depth explanation of the way people can pursue a range of roles in life at the same time. Critics have however opined that the stage model offered by Super still represents a relatively linear and normative career model which may not suit the diffuse, portfolio-based careers that are becoming increasingly prevalent in post-industrial economies (Betz, 1994; Krumboltz, 2009).

The RIASEC model by John Holland (1997) proposed the typological model of understanding person-environment fit in six personality types, including Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional. The model developed by Holland has been shown to be largely empirically valid and is still very common in the vocational counseling (Spokane et al., 2000). However, its typological hardness has attracted criticism of overemphasizing developmental change, situational forces and intersectional identity aspects (Fouad, 2007).

Career Anchors theory by Edgar Schein (1990) is a theory that postulated that people form their own stable self concepts based on specific values, motives, and competencies, anchors, which restrain and direct career decisions. Although the framework of Schein has considered the psychological depth of the career identity, it has been criticized as giving too much emphasis on stability to the expense of career agility and reinvention (Feldman and Bolino, 1996).

#### **Contemporary Career Theories**

Theoretical input has been made more recently to represent non-linearity and complexity of contemporary careers. The Career Construction Theory, developed by Mark Savickas (2005), shifts career into the narrative that is produced by people as a result of adaptive responses to developmental tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas. The focus of Savickas on identity, reflexivity, and adaptability is very close to the iterative spirit of agile methodology.

Perhaps the most radical break in the deterministic career models is the Chaos Theory of Careers (Pryor and Bright, 2011). Based on chaotic and complex science, Pryor and Bright have suggested that careers are non-linear, emergent and largely based on chance occurrences. This theory confirms the uncertainty of modern careers and, most importantly, sanctifies flexibility, permeability, and opportunism as fundamental careers values, the tenets of which are strongly agile values.

The Happenstance Learning Theory (2009) by Krumboltz also focuses on the idea of how unintended situations determine the career path and urges people to develop curiosity, persistence, flexibility, and optimism as the reaction to the unexpected circumstances. The above-mentioned contemporary theories, taken collectively, form a theoretical landscape that becomes more consonant to the thinking of agility.

#### **Limitations of Traditional Career Development Approaches**

Although the current career development models are rich in theory, there are a number of major constraints that limit their practical application in the modern day. The most enduring is the assumption of linearity which is persistent. Even non-linear models like the stage theory of Super still tend to give rise to successively forward-looking developmental sequences that seldom take into consideration lateral transfers or career detractors, multi-vocational occupational paths, or radical discontinuities (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009). This

linearity does not explain the portfolio careers, slash careers and entrepreneurial career paths that define post industrial labor markets (Handy, 1994).

The second important constraint is on the time direction of the majority of career models. The traditional models are inclined to front-load career decision-making, which means that they promote the tendency of people to make significant vocational decisions at the early stages of life, in adolescence or early adulthood, and to make them as lifelong commitments. This model that is front-loaded is increasingly being contradicted by empirical studies that show that the development of career identity is lifelong and that changes in career during the mid-life are not only prevalent but productive (Ibarra, 2003).

Third, the majority of traditional models do not pay much attention to continuous skill development and competency building as to career success. In knowledge economies where half-life of skills is shortening at a rapid pace, such as the one on which the World Economic Forum (2023) estimated that 44 percent of core skills of workers would be disrupted within five years, career development models should anticipate lifelong learning as an evolving, iterative process not a preparation stage before joining a career.

Fourth, the available frameworks provide less information on how people ought to react strategically to feedbacks received through labor market cues, employers, mentors, and professional networks. Lack of well-organized feedback systems on the majority of career models makes persons unprepared to correct their course immediately, a skill that is progressively critical in turbulent workplaces.

Lastly, there is a significant loophole between project management and organizational thinking and individual career development. Although scholars of human resource management discussed how agile concepts could change talent development in organizations (Denning, 2018; Gotelf and Seiden, 2017), limited attention was paid to how these concepts could affect the professional development of an individual career actor.

### **Agile Methodology: Principles and Transferability** **Core Agile Principles**

Agile methodology is based on four values which are stipulated in the Agile Manifesto (Beck et al., 2001): people and interaction rather than processes and tools; working software rather than detailed documentation; customer interaction rather than contract negotiation; responding to change rather than a plan. The

operationalization of these values is based on a twelve-point principle that focuses on an iterative delivery process, continuous feedback, cross-functional cooperation, and adaptive planning.

A number of agile models have been developed based on this foundation. The most popular is Scrum, which is structured into sprints, time-boxed (usually two to four weeks each) periods during which a cross-functional team strives to produce a specified increment of value (Schwaber and Sutherland, 2020). A product backlog, a prioritized list of work items, and the sprint retrospective, whereby the team introspects on its process and finds something to improve, lie at the core of Scrum. Another popular method of agile, Kanban, is workflow visualization, work-in-progress limit, and constant flow throughput improvement (Anderson, 2010). Most of the principles of agile are based on lean thinking that helps emphasize the eradication of wastes, the maximization of value, and the empowerment of the practitioners (Womack and Jones, 2003).

### **Agile Principles and Career Development Alignment**

Applicability of agile principles in career building is based on some convergent features. To begin with, both agile project management and modern career development are characterized by the basic focus on coping with uncertainty. The same way that agile teams are inclined to embrace change instead of resist, good career actors should develop the skill of redirecting to meet the changing needs of the market, technological upheaval, and individual situation (Pryor & Bright, 2011).

Second, the agile focus on incremental development, that is, delivering small steps of value instead of striving to be perfect before launching a product, translates effectively to the career growth requirement of never-ending acquisition of skills and experimentation. An agile career actor does not wait to be fully prepared before taking new opportunities, instead he or she proceeds to take up roles and projects and constantly keeps creating and finishing them in a kind of sprint, which brings new learning and marketable output.

Third, the agile principle of feedback loops has a direct career development equivalent in the value of mentoring, performance reviews, coaching peers, and involvement in professional networks. Agile frameworks rely heavily on feedback mechanisms that ensure that the teams are in touch with the needs of the stakeholders and can rectify their path whenever they go off track

(Schwaber and Sutherland, 2020). In professional life, similar processes can help a person to align their growth path with the expectations of employers, the dynamics of the industry, and personal priorities.

Fourth, the agile idea of a product backlog a high-priority, dynamic list of what might be done is resonant with the concept of a career backlog: a curated, priority-ordered list of what I would like to learn, do, and places to visit, and goals to accomplish. The backlog of such a backlog must be continuously prioritized and estimated and strategic de-selected, all of which are career resiliency and effectiveness skills (Stickland, 1996).

### **The Agile Career Development Framework (ACDF)**

The paper is based on the above theoretical background and the discussion on transferability to expand on this concept and introduce the Agile Career Development Framework (ACDF), which is a five-phase, cyclical approach to career building at an individual level. The ACDF specifically uses Scrum ceremonies and artifacts, reconfigured to personal career development. All the phases are outlined below.

#### **Phase 1: Career Backlog Construction**

The ACDF starts with the development of a Career Backlog, which is an inventory of prioritized items of career development. These things can consist of skills to learn, credentials to receive, roles to explore, networks to develop, projects to pursue, and values to explain. The Career Backlog is a dynamic document which is constantly changed with the emergence of information, opportunities and constraints unlike a fixed career plan (Stickland, 1996). The backlog entries are formatted as career user stories, first-person descriptions of desired development, stating what skill or role and experience I want to acquire, and what value that acquisition would give.

The backlog is built up by a set of reflective exercises based on the available career assessment instruments. The RIASEC inventory (1997) could be used to explain the vocational interests of Holland and identify congruent roles, Schein Career Anchors questionnaire (1990) could help to identify the underlying values and priorities, and Career Story Interview (2005) could help to get the narrative data and recognize the career themes, competencies, and aspirations. All of these assessment tools provide the initial backlog population with information, which should be used to inform later sprint planning on a theoretically-grounded basis.

#### **Phase 2: Sprint Planning**

Sprint Planning in the ACDF includes identification of manageable set of backlog items to be handled within a specific time period-one to three months. Some of the criteria that should guide a selection of sprint are strategic priority (consistency with long-term career objectives); immediate feasibility (resource availability, time and opportunity); market relevance (consistency with labor market demand signs); and developmental logic (sequencing skills prerequisites). This step is similar to Scrum sprint planning ceremony where a development team determines what can be delivered within the next sprint and is able to describe how the chosen work would be done (Schwaber and Sutherland, 2020).

One of the key aspects of ACDF Sprint Planning is the clear description of success criteria, or, to be more precise, the one that Scrum practitioners refer to as the Definition of Done. Regarding each career sprint item, the individual provides what will be observable evidence in successful completion. This may involve doing some certification course, getting positive performance feedback in a new job, writing a professional article, or a successful project implementation in a new area. This particularity will turn indistinct career dreams into concrete time-limited commitments.

#### **Phase 3: Skill Sprints**

Skill Sprints are the implementation part of the ACDF. The stage involves the following: the person follows the chosen backlog items by taking action: enrolling in learning programs, performing stretch assignments, going to professional events, or initiating pilot projects. Based on the idea of deliberate practice that was proposed by Ericsson (Ericsson et al., 1993), Skill Sprints are the approach that puts the emphasis on the deliberate and concentrated effort instead of the accumulation of experience passively. The person keeps a daily or weekly sprinting diary, similar to the daily standup of a Scrum team, with notes on progress and challenges faced and lessons learned.

Principles of psychological safety and experimentation that make up agile culture are also integrated in Skill Sprint phase (Edmondson, 1999). People are advised to take sprint activities as trials and not as firm commitments and make normalizations on the occurrence of failure or redirection as good learning experiences, but not as signs of incompetence. This orientation is consistent with the growth mindset framework (Dweck, 2006) that assumes that people who

view abilities as something that can be developed with the help of effort are more resilient and achieve over time, as compared to those with fixed mindset orientations.

### **Phase 4: Sprint Retrospective and Reflection**

The phase of the ACDF which is, perhaps, the most theoretically significant is the Sprint Retrospective because it embodies the reflexive loop of learning that is the distinguishing feature of agile and linear approaches. The person, at the end of every sprint, has a structured retrospective, analyzing three types of questions: What went well? What did not go as planned? What is to be changed in the following sprint? It is based on the idea of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action introduced by Schon (1983) and the experiential learning cycle by Kolb (1984), both of which highlight the transformative nature of the structured reflection as a process of understanding and enhancing performance in the future.

The feedback of external stakeholders, which include mentors, peers, supervisors, clients, and contacts of other professionals are also included in the retrospective and their views could shed light on the blind areas in the self-evaluation of the person. In this regard, the ACDF retrospective operationalizes the Johari Window model (Luft and Ingham, 1955), which allows the individual open self-knowledge to be developed by introducing outside opinions into the process of reflection. The learnings in the retrospection process actually feed into the next background refinement and sprint planning cycle, establishing a development cycle.

### **Phase 5: Backlog Refinement and Career Pivoting**

The last part of the ACDF cycle is the Continuous improvement of the Career Backlog based on retrospective learning, market response, reflection and the new opportunities. Items can be re-ranked, re-framed, new or deleted. More importantly, this step also provides a systematic room to purposely pivot career trajectory- the repositioning of career path along to novel data on personal fit, market need, or strategic chance. Ibarra (2003) established the fact that good career changers usually go through a series of temporary experimentation and not planning but trial in trying new identities by taking action and only by acting will they make an investment in a new direction. There is a sense of legitimization and organization of this experimental process through the ACDF, which gives a structure through which pivoting is anticipated but not exceptional.

The repetitive process of the five ACDF steps takes the person to the starting point of the process with an enhanced backlog, clear priorities, and enhanced self-

understanding. The framework develops not only domain-specific competencies but also meta-competencies such as the agile career skills of planning, adapting, reflecting, networking, and self-regulating, which are gaining increasing popularity among employers of all kinds (Drath and Hazy, 2020).

### **Critical Analysis of the ACDF**

#### **Strengths of the Framework**

The ACDF has some major benefits compared to the conventional models of career development. Its iterative, round cycle design represents the empirical fact of the modern career path much better than linear stage models. It has an important missing element of feedback that is essential in most career development models. It is based on existing agile practices, which make it operation-specific and practically usable. And its overt concord of pivot and change makes the experimentation and redirection of career so normal that modern labour markets insist on.

Moreover, the ACDF integrates the lessons of several theoretical traditions, including career development theory, organizational learning, positive psychology, and project management, and it becomes truly transdisciplinary, therefore resistant to the diverse requirements of various career settings. Its modularity, the ability to adjust the length of sprints and the size of backlogs to its own situation, enables it to be flexible to different career stages, both in the entry to the first career and in the movement between the senior leadership and the first career.

#### **Limitations and Critical Concerns**

The ACDF is not without its shortcomings and the limitations associated with the method are several and need to be sincerely questioned. One of the first issues is connected with the implicit assumption of agency and access to resources being an individual issue in the framework. Agile methodology has been created in the organizational setting where the teams receive material resources, secure time, coaching infrastructure, and organizational support. The particular career agents, especially the ones belonging to economically disadvantaged groups, caring duties, or contingent jobs, might not have the same access to time, money, development, and professional connections (Blustein et al., 2019). The assumption that career development solely lies on the individual puts at a risk of individualising structural inequalities which are inherently structural in nature and blurs the manner in

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which race, gender, class, disability, and geography limit career opportunity (Young and Collin, 2000).

The second limitation deals with cognitive and emotional requirements of the ACDF. The framework demands advanced self-assessment, planning, reflective and engagement of stakeholder capabilities. Such abilities are not equally scattered among all people and could be poorly developed in those who received a poor education or mentor. Furthermore, the long-term self-driven nature of the agile method can be psychologically stressful among those who have job insecurity, work burnout, or mental disorders who are common in modern workforces (Maslach and Leiter, 2016).

Third, the productivity metaphorical concept used on personal development, sprints, backlog, velocity, deliverables, can present a commodified and instrumentalized approach to self that contradicts humanistic values in career counseling. Theorists of the critical career studies tradition have expressed critical apprehension about enacting the logic of the market into the discourse of career, and have contended that this logic can act as a repression of the genuine expression of self in favor of a marketable expression of self (Sennett, 1998; Lazzarato, 2009). The ACDF should be enforced with clear consideration towards ensuring that career planning is based on genuine values and wellbeing but not necessarily market responsiveness.

Fourth, the focus of the framework on the process of constant repetition and improvement can unconsciously result in the strengthening of perfectionist traits or anxiety in people who would take the message of the necessity to be always improving as a critique of their current state. Counselors and career educators who adopt the ACDF need to be mindful to these psychological processes and encompass self-compassion practices, based on the work of Neff (2011) and others, as overt parts of the retrospective process.

### **Implementation Implications**

#### **Implications for Career Counselors**

The ACDF phases can become a successful part of the practice of career advisors and vocational psychologists because of their use as a conversational scaffold when communicating with clients. Career Backlog Construction phase generates the possibilities to explore values, interests, and goals in a structured way with the help of available assessment tools. Sprint Planning stage presents goal-setting theory (Locke and Latham, 2002) in a friendly manner. The Retrospective phase works out the reflective practice methods that were

already well-established in counseling pedagogy. Counselors ought to be mindful of equity issues and so, sprint planning must be adjusted to the actual resource limitations of each client and those structural obstacles should be called by name and not internalized into the individual development plans.

#### **Implications for Educational Institutions**

The ACDF can be used to redesign career education programs in universities, colleges, and vocational training institutions. Instead of creating single career tutorials or career planning classes, academic institutions might instate agile career development as a progressive, iterative process that would start at enrollment and proceed into graduation and beyond. By combining career backlogs with academic advising, internship placement, and alumni mentoring schemes, the institutional infrastructure that can be deployed to facilitate students in carrying out meaningful career sprints during their educational process would be in place (Bridgstock, 2009).

#### **Implications for Human Resource Professionals**

Human resource managers and talent development professionals can deploy the ACDF as a framework for employee career development within organizational contexts. Career development programs structured around quarterly career sprints, supported by regular retrospective conversations with managers and mentors, could replace—or significantly enrich—conventional annual performance review processes. Organizations that create conditions in which employees can build career agility are likely to benefit from higher engagement, retention, and adaptability (Bersin, 2018; Denning, 2018). Talent development practitioners should, however, ensure that organizational career agility programs include mechanisms for addressing systemic barriers to advancement, such as bias in promotion decisions and differential access to high-visibility assignments.

#### **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that the agile methodology—developed in software engineering but with broad applicability across domains—offers a theoretically grounded and practically useful framework for enhancing individual career building in the contemporary labor market. The proposed Agile Career Development Framework (ACDF) synthesizes classical and contemporary career development theories with agile principles to create a cyclical, iterative, feedback-rich model for career growth. The ACDF also allows one to

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make better intentioned, flexible, and resilient to career complexity through five interconnected phases: Career Backlog Construction, Sprint Planning, Skill Sprints, Sprint Retrospective, and Backlog Refinement.

More importantly, critical, the paper has not only recognized the serious limitations and equity issues that need to be overcome should the ACDF become a truly inclusive framework as opposed to a structural disadvantage naturalizing and individualizing mechanism. Further research ought to establish the ACDF in an empirical way with various segments of the population, assess its various results to be more attentive to its dissimilarity and applicability in diverse labor markets and career periods and investigate the ways that institutional actors can contribute to the formation of conducive factors in the implementation of the ACDF. In the studies that investigate the subject of agile career development on an individual level, qualitative studies would be of great benefit in bringing forth the psychological, as well as social, dynamics that would otherwise not have been reflected in any quantitative study.

Finally, the agile thinking approach to career development may be seen not only as a methodological change but also as a philosophical one, that is, it puts career actors not as passive receivers of fixed institutional frameworks, but as analytical and reflective as well as constantly adaptive creators of their professional life. Career agility development might not be the greatest investment individuals, institutions, and societies can make in a labor market where change is the only constant factor.

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