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| IU International University |
| Personal Career Plan Course Code: DLBKAENT01 |

# Unit 1 – Career Theories and Approaches

Study goals

After working through this unit, you will be able to ...

… define the term “career” and differentiate between career concepts.

… compare and delineate traditional and modern career models.

… identify career learning cycles and understand which metacompetencies are essential for a successful career learning cycle.

# 1. Career Theories and Approaches

### Introduction

People face career choices at many stages throughout their lives, rather than just once. Careers are a recurring and pivotal theme for all of us: At school, at the beginning of our careers, mid-way through our working lives, and even many years later.

Lisa, who is about to finish high school, is contemplating her future. She has always dreamed of studying journalism. However, her parents work for a bank and would like to steer her toward a cooperative study program with a bank for a more “durable” qualification. Lisa faces a dilemma: Should she pursue her passion for journalism or follow her parents’ advice?

Stephan has been a consultant for five years and gained extensive experience in different companies and industries, which he finds fascinating. Following a steep learning curve, it’s time to plan his next career move. Should he pursue a role that plays to his strengths and allows him to position himself as an expert? Or should he maintain his broader skillset and versatility to keep as many career options open as possible?

Anna-Lena is Head of Finance at a start-up. After giving birth to her daughter, she took a year’s maternity leave. Now she is wondering whether it would be better to reduce her hours or try to balance career and family life. This decision is not solely about her career, but about making it fit with her overall life plan.

Richard has spent the last five years heading up a charitable foundation. The board has indicated it might invite him to remain for a further term, but Richard feels uncertain about committing. Perhaps it is time to take a step back and give someone else a chance?

As these examples illustrate, career path choices do not only concern those starting out but recur repeatedly throughout different life stages. Are you on the career path you initially envisaged? Does it align with your own values and desired direction, and does it provide the right balance between hours worked, recognition received, and financial reward?

Considering your career from a theoretical perspective and exploring your career learning cycle and direction may prove useful.

## 1.1 Definition and Classification of a Career

Career choice issues are not a new concept. Young people in particular may find it difficult to decide on a career direction. Questions such as “Which occupation is right for you?” may arise at any point, even after completing an apprenticeship or degree, mid-way through our working lives, or when we are already well-established in a successful career. At different stages, we may wonder which path to choose, what our next career move should be, or if it’s time for a change. Career orientation is a lifelong process that extends beyond the selection of our first job.

Career choice theories have abounded since the early 20th century when modern labor market structures first emerged. As always, the challenge (Brüggemann & Rahn, 2020, S. 12) lies in finding a career with prospects that accommodate our individual interests and abilities while simultaneously maintaining the strategic flexibility to keep our goals and preferences realistic and aligned with the needs of the labor market. In some situations, the labor market becomes saturated with applicants offering sought-after skills, while a popular career may reflect your personality traits but not suit current market requirements.

### Career Trajectories

In the past, occupations were predetermined and life was simple: If your parents were bakers, doctors, or shoemakers, you would most likely follow in their footsteps, often taking over the family business from them.

Industrialization changed all this. New jobs in factories and manufacturing required little in the way of prior technical knowledge. Employment was readily available and earning money became the main focus.

Today, there is a vast choice of apprenticeships and academic courses available, not to mention a wealth of different occupations. While some view their jobs as merely a means of earning money, others make conscious career choices that often require training. Still, others have a calling to a vocation which fills them with great joy and passion.

The sheer number of choices available makes it difficult to decide on a career. Should you opt for a job that requires extensive skills and strengths? Do you have a sufficient understanding of your individual talents? Or should you consciously choose the career path that promises the greatest possible success? And how do you define success?

### Definition of a Career

**Career versus occupation**

In this text, we have used the terms career and occupation interchangeably. Whereas in the past, the word career tended to be associated with career advancement, more modern career models have revealed the inadequacy of this definition.

The term **career** is derived from the French word “carrière,” meaning path or racetrack (Latzke et al., 2019). Essentially, a career describes the roles and positions held by an individual over the course of their employment history. A career may be linked to a particular profession (such as a predefined civil service career) or a defined sequence of roles within an organization (such as hierarchical levels within a large law firm) (Latzke et al., 2019; Hirschi, 2019); but equally, a career may also extend across multiple organizations.

A distinction is made between objective careers and subjective careers: An objective career covers the sequence of roles held by an individual over the course of their working life and is based around selected indices such as salary, number of employees, or status symbols. By contrast, a subjective career focuses on the career path in its entirety in conjunction with subjective perceptions. It also addresses other aspects such as satisfaction, well-being, personal growth, self-fulfillment, and acknowledgement (Latzke et al., 2019; Heslin, 2005).

It is important to note that “career” is used here non-evaluatively, making the definition much broader than the one used in common parlance (Latzke et al., 2019). The academic definition of the term “career” is the same in both German-speaking and Anglo-American countries.

While in German, the word “career” is often associated with success – especially upward trajectories and promotions within hierarchical organizations – in English, in English it serves as a more neutral, non-judgmental reflection of individual development.

To further differentiate the concept of career within German-speaking countries, recent research has introduced various perspectives to the definition.

For example, Auer (2000) identified three distinct meanings of “career,” depending on individual motivation:

* Career in the sense of advancement means a career path which strives for more senior roles and greater responsibility,
* Career as gainful employment, with an emphasis on financial remuneration, and
* Career in a more universal sense, which holistically incorporates both work-related aspects as well as personal values, interests, and goals.

Auer argues that every individual determines the importance of their own career within the context of their own life plan.

Hall identifies another key distinction between “career” concepts (1996; 2004), namely:

* Career as professional advancement (promotions and speed at which positions are achieved),
* Career as a profession (well-established professions with high qualification requirements, such as doctors, judges, and professors),
* Career as a lifelong sequence of role-related experiences (an individual’s assessment of their career development stages), and
* Career as the sum total of positions held over the course of a person’s working life (any job or role-related success, not necessarily following a vertical trajectory).

The above definitions illustrate that the term “career” has multiple interpretations. A few decades ago, careers were traditionally centered around advancement, and many university graduates aspired to management roles and positions at the highest echelons of the company. The associated responsibilities, rapid rise through the ranks, and – in many cases – high salaries entailed long working hours, limited free time, and self-determination.

In contrast, the modern understanding of work considers this vertical career trajectory equating promotions with hierarchical progression as outdated.

A growing emphasis on the “modern career” now encompasses social factors and transformational processes, whereby individuals define their career status themselves (Drodge, 2002; Hall, 2004). Attention focuses primarily on individual career orientation and career motivation.

More and more companies, especially start-ups, are moving toward flatter hierarchies. They offer alternative incentive systems to promote personal growth and self-fulfillment, rather than simply focusing on promotion. For example, opportunities to work abroad (to broaden horizons), sabbaticals, further education, start-up support, and more are available.

It is important to differentiate here between “career” and “choice of occupation,” since the latter refers solely to the active, autonomous decision-making phase when selecting employment within the context of your own career (Brüggemann & Rahn, 2020, S. 12; Rübner & Höft, 2019).

### Introduction to the Theory

Before proceeding further, let’s consider the “theory”. What exactly are theories, and how can they help to coalesce thoughts and concepts?

A scientific theory is an explanation and exploration of a particular field by combining multiple assumptions, hypotheses, and statements into a system, while allowing for the following requirements (Berger-Grabner, 2022, S. 135):

* **Logical consistency:** The theory should be consistent and follow a logical structure.
* **Internal coherence:** Arguments derived from the theory should be free from contradictions.
* **Objectivity:** The theory may be extended to a wide range of applications, even with minimal assumptions.
* **Verifiability:** The theory should withstand rigorous and varied testing.

Only when all these criteria are met can a theory claim to be valid and scientifically verified.

A theory is an assumption about causal relationships – in other words, observed phenomena are related to one another in a cause-effect relationship (Berger-Grabner, 2022).

Theories may be classified in terms of their complexity and range:

* **High-complexity theories:** Highly complex **metatheories** are very comprehensive and detailed, covering multiple aspects of a particular topic or discipline. They tend to be abstract and general, and their understanding and application requires a high level of intellect.
* **High-range theories:** These global theories are comprehensive but less complex than their high-complexity counterparts. They cover multiple aspects of a particular topic or discipline but are more precise and easier to understand and apply. One example of a high-range theory is Leon Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, which purports to explain inconsistencies in human thinking and behavior.
* **Middle-range theories:** So-called *Ad hoc* theories are more specific and precise than high-range theories, but less comprehensive. They relate to a specific topic or discipline and offer detailed explanations and predictions. One example of a middle-range theory is Fred Fiedler's contingency theory, which seeks to identify the most effective leadership styles in a range of situations.

**Metatheory**

A metatheory focuses on the theories and methods used to explain a phenomenon, rather than the phenomenon itself.

* **Low-range theories:** These more practical theories are very specific and tangible, relating to specific phenomena or situations. They offer detailed explanations and predictions but are not transferable to other areas or contexts. One example of a low-range theory is the Hawthorne Effect, which examines the impact of working conditions on employee performance.

**Falsification**

Falsification is an important part of the scientific process. A falsified theory need not necessarily be rejected completely but may need to be modified or developed in order to meet its predictions more accurately. The theory “All swans are white” is unequivocally falsified by the sighting of a black swan.

By their nature, theories tend to be incomplete and provisional, with a temporary claim to validity until **falsified**. They help us to improve our understanding of reality, collate prior knowledge of experiences, and deduce important information with practical relevance.