

## **ADAPTABILITY**

Jérôme Rossier, Institute of Psychology, University of Lausanne, CH-1015 Lausanne,  
Switzerland

E-mail: Jerome.Rossier@unil.ch

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### **Abstract**

Adaptability is usually conceived as a psychological capacity that sustains adaptive behaviors, allowing one to face and manage stressors. It promotes adjustment between a person and its environment through a constant, dynamic, and dialectic interaction between them. Adaptability is conceptually and empirically distinct from dispositions such as personality or intelligence, but can be considered as a self-regulation process promoting an adequate person-environment fit (P-E fit), psychological health, and positive career-related outcomes, such as employability, employment, or work engagement. Adaptability evolves according to the circumstances and people can activate their adaptive abilities in adverse situations. Brief psychological interventions increase adaptability, which in turn improves employability and career success.

### **Definition and Emergence of the Construct**

Adaptability is usually conceived as the psychological capacity that allows people to adapt, in a constant, dynamic, and dialectic interaction with the environment. This adaptation is understood in terms of mutual adjustment and recognition. It may occur within close interpersonal relations or within larger social structures or organizations. Adaptability has been linked with the Freudian notion of regression; adaptive regression is a shift from the ability to delay immediate gratification and a lack of mobility to immediate gratification and flexibility. It

might promote several adaptive behaviors such as problem-solving skills and creativity.

Adaptive capacity was also an important aspect of Jean Piaget's (1896-1980) theory of cognitive development. According to his view, the cognitive system is adaptive when assimilation and accommodation processes are balanced and when both are equally effective. The importance of an unstable equilibrium was already central in Claude Bernard's (1813-1878) and Walter Bradford Cannon's (1871-1945) notions of homeostasis, the property resulting from a cycle of disruption and reintegration allowing adaptation to internal and external changes. Adaptation, and thus adaptability, is also a product of evolutionary processes.

Nowadays adaptability is usually conceived as a psychological means that sustains adaptive behaviors allowing one to face and manage stressors and to promote an adjustment between a person and its environment (P-E fit). Both adaptability and coping are two constructs that contribute to regulate the expression of contextually adapted behaviors and affect. Savickas (1997) claimed that adaptability is a crucial competence in a contemporary world, since it fosters the ability to handle its insecurity and to manage our lives and careers. In this context adaptability increases people's tolerance to uncertainty and ambiguity, and helps them to evolve in a dynamic and boundaryless context.

Adaptability is considered as one of the four levels of adaptive functioning. First, people differ according to trait-like dispositions (also referred to as proneness to adapt), or their predisposition to adapt depending of their level of *adaptivity* or flexibility. Second, in order to adapt people have to be able to use and activate regulation processes that are psychosocial resources, called *adaptability* (or abilities to adapt). Third, when people express adaptive responses, such as orientation, exploration, or self-management behaviors, they are *adapting*. Finally, adaptive functioning or *adaptation* occurs if the P-E fit is satisfactory for the

environment and satisfying for the person. According to this perspective, adaptability is a set of important regulation processes underlying adaptation.

### **Adaptability and Dispositions**

**Adaptability and Personality.** Michael Kirton developed his adaptive-innovative theory in the seventies to describe the problem-solving styles of executives, managers, and leaders. He distinguished on one end of a continuum people who prefer to “do things better”, and on the other end people who prefer to “do things differently”. Both styles are adaptive, but doing things differently requires more creativity and the use of new, original, and culturally acceptable problem-solving strategies. These cognitive styles are considered as consistent individual differences and are known to relate meaningfully with the Big Five personality dimensions. The adaptive-innovative dimension correlates positively with extraversion and openness to experience, and negatively with conscientiousness. Moreover, decision-making performance in a changing workplace seems to be positively associated with openness, and negatively with conscientiousness. On the contrary, when considering adaptability as a set of adaptive abilities from a psychosocial perspective, it is negatively associated with neuroticism and agreeableness, and positively with extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness (the strongest association). These contrasted correlations that problem-solving styles and adaptability show with conscientiousness indicate that they are conceptually different. Moreover, the overlap between these styles, adaptability and personality is only partial.

**Adaptability and Intelligence.** Adaptive behaviors are usually described as being the result of learned cognitive, practical, and social competencies allowing people to function in everyday life as expected by the cultural group. Emotional disturbance and cognitive disabilities are considered as maladaptive, and the assessment of adaptive functioning is important for

diagnosing mental retardation and learning disabilities. Context also impacts adaptive functioning; for example childhood abuse is linked with the future development of cognitive flexibility and presumably adaptability.

According to Robert Sternberg (1949-), cognitive abilities contribute to adaptive skills and to performance as expected by the social context. General intelligence helps people cope with everyday demands and has thus an important adaptive function. Yet, despite its adaptive function and its correlations with adaptive responses, the association between intelligence and adaptability competences, such as exploratory behaviors or planning skills, are usually small. This confirms that adaptability has to be distinguished from intelligence and adaptive behaviors. An illustration of this phenomenon is that multitasking abilities predict cognitive skills, such as working memory, but seem to be slightly different from multitasking adaptability, that concerns the ability to respond rapidly to changing task demands. Finally, social intelligence or emotional intelligence is related with adaptability or adaptive abilities in social contexts or tasks.

### **Adaptability as a Self-Regulation Ability**

Adaptability refers to abilities that regulate behavioral and affective expression in order to select adapted behaviors and to feel appropriate emotions associated with low levels of discomfort or cognitive dissonance. Several concepts share common aspects with adaptability, and can be considered to some extent as self-regulation processes. Firstly, three coping skills are traditionally distinguished: Appraisal-focused (understanding the causes), problem-focused (finding a solution), and emotion-focused coping (regulating the affects induced by the difficulty). Secondly, the concept of ego resilience or resilience describes the ability of some people to overcome adverse and stressful situations by reequilibrating their responses to adjust to changing conditions. Then, cognitive flexibility implies a willingness to be flexible and a

confidence in the ability to behave effectively; self-confidence can promote a feeling of security allowing flexibility, and can also induce less permeability to external influences. Finally, emotional regulation processes, self-efficacy and outcome expectations are also seen as regulation processes.

Adaptability shares some aspects with all these constructs and contributes along with a clearly structured self-concept to resilience or flexibility. Communication flexibility positively relates to communication adaptability. Moreover, coping flexibility refers to a person's ability to use a diversity of strategies to handle challenges occurring in different circumstances. This coping flexibility is promoted by dialectical thinking capacities and negatively correlates with a need for closure (or an intolerance to uncertainty and ambiguity). Being able to use different coping patterns or strategies, being able to actualize multiple roles, selves, or identities contributes to help individuals adapt to changing circumstances. For example, people with higher coping flexibility are less sensitive to stressful situations and tend to have a lower systolic blood pressure in those situations. Thus, individuals with a wide array of self-regulation abilities probably have fewer difficulties to manage a wide variety of dynamic internal and external constraints.

This regulation is possible because these processes are sensitive to the environment and contribute thus to an adaptive feedback loop. Taking into account information from that loop, activating the most adaptive mechanism, and adjusting one's behavioral expression is likely facilitated by one's self-awareness. The self, the multiple selves, or the self-concept constitutes a meta-competency that manages the activation and allocation of these adaptive resources. Moreover, adaptability, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations promote an anticipation of the implications of one's choices and behaviors. Thus, these processes can help people adopt

preventive and protective behaviors. This property of adaptability also contributes to self-directedness and to people's proactivity, referring to anticipatory and change-oriented behaviors with an impact on the environment. Adaptability is therefore not only about people's adaptation to the external constraints but also about adjusting the context to their needs.

### **Adaptability, Health, and Career Outcomes**

**Adaptability and Well-being.** Several studies have shown that regulation processes, such as adaptability or self-efficacy, are positively linked with psychological health and well-being. These self-regulation processes are positively related to life satisfaction and positive affect and negatively related to negative affect. At the same time, reciprocal influences between these psychological resources, well-being, and overall quality of life are very likely, as illustrated by the fact that the relationship between adaptability and life satisfaction is partially mediated by hope. Moreover, adaptability has long-term implications for life satisfaction and well-being since it influences affect well-being even one year later. Considering that adaptability is thought to be strongly influenced by circumstances, these long-term effects of adaptability might be explained by positive short-term impacts triggering a virtuous circle between adaptability, adaptation, positive emotions, and well-being.

**Adaptability at Work.** According to the theory of work adjustment, the P-E fit implies a fit between abilities and requirements on one side, and values and reinforcers on the other side, leading respectively to satisfactoriness and job satisfaction. This adjustment process implies usually an adaptation that can be active, by changing the context, or reactive by adapting to the context. Organizations today are often very dynamic and changing environments require from employees a constant adaptation. The underlying ability to adapt is associated with the capacity to handle work stress, crises, unpredictable work situations, learning new work situations, etc.

Adaptability is an important predictor of academic achievements, job engagement, and job performance, especially when this performance occurs in a dynamic situation. For example, the adaptability of telemarketing sales representatives during interactions with clients predicts their sales performance. In the workplace, cognitive adaptability is also known for being negatively linked to unrealistic expectations that in turn are associated with less burnout. Furthermore, adaptability also contributes to people's employability and their ability to gain and maintain employment.

**Career Adaptability.** In the contemporary world characterized by the emergence of new technologies, globalization, downsizing, or even rightsizing, being adaptable and able to learn have become crucial abilities to plan and self-manage a personal career. The psychosocial construct of *career adaptability* has been developed to describe a set of abilities contributing to peoples' competence to make appropriate career choices, manage and construct their career, and design their life. Career adaptability includes a set of four abilities: Concern, associated with the ability to plan; control, associated with the ability to make decision; curiosity, associated with the ability to explore; and confidence, associated with the ability to solve problems. Career adaptability is positively linked with P-E fit, job performance, employability, and negatively with turnover intention. Thus, organizational retention strategies should pay particular attention to unsatisfied but adaptable people more at risk of leaving the organization. Of course, individuals do not only use internal resources to cope with their professional environment. Other resources, such as social support, are also very important. However an adaptable person might have more facilities to take advantage of external resources.

### **Role of Adaptability for P-E Relationships**

The self-regulation process at the core of adaptability implies that it mediates, and/or

moderates the behavioral expression of personal dispositions, to adjust this expression to environmental expectations. Moreover, adaptability also mediates the environmental impact on the relationship between dispositions and behaviors. This mediation may constitute one of the pathways of the feedback loop of adaptation. For example, career adaptability is known for partially mediating the relationship between internal dispositions, such as personality or orientations to happiness, and work related outcomes, such as work engagement or work stress. Similarly, adaptive skills mediate the relationship between values and contextual work-performance. As expected, career adaptability also mediates the impact of external constraints, such as job insecurity or job strain, on work-related behaviors or well-being outcomes, such as job satisfaction, work stress, life satisfaction, or psychological health. Psychological flexibility helps people deal with adverse job conditions, and overwhelming social interactions, but this help is particularly effective when people are not exhausted. Thus, adaptability has an impact on the demands-exhaustion-performance relationship by diminishing the negative impacts of job demands on exhaustion and performance, but these relationships are complex and certainly not all linear. Highly adaptable people also invest more in maintaining an adequate P-E fit. As such, they are proactive in their relation with their environment. Finally, adaptability also helps people choose an environment adapted to their aims and goals, by diversifying their options. Still, even though adaptability is an important regulation process, other processes, such as emotional regulation, self-efficacy, or humor also contribute to this self-regulation.

### **Enhancing Adaptability**

A secure familial environment and parental behaviors of acceptance and involvement favor the development of children's adaptability. One goal of education is to increase children's ability to cope with novelty, new tasks, and social situations. As such, for a social group or a

family, this adaptability implies the ability to change its rules, its way of functioning, and its members' roles in response to new circumstances. Interestingly, some authors consider that being too adaptive, especially for a family, can be potentially problematic due to the lack of structures, but that a lack of adaptability might also be problematic due to the rigidity that it implies. When getting older, the unity of the self, openness to experience, flexibility, and adaptability tends to decrease slowly.

If adaptability seems to evolve during the life-span, it also seems to change quite rapidly due to circumstances. For example, people with slightly higher adaptability have a more stable employment situation, suggesting that adaptability helps them find more favorable job situations. Yet, unemployed people seem to have higher level of adaptability, suggesting that people activate their resources and adaptive skills in adverse situations. Similarly, but in an opposite direction, once a career choice is made, career adaptability seems to decrease. Thus, adaptability is a dynamic component of a person varying with circumstances.

One way to help people cope with stressful or changing demands is to stimulate and enhance these regulation or adaptive processes in order to promote an easier adaptation. Several interventions have been developed to increase emotional regulation competences and they have been shown to be very effective. Moreover, adaptability-centered brief-career interventions have proven to increase counselees' employability, job satisfaction, person-organization fit, and career success, as well as to decrease turnover intentions. In sum, adaptability is an important regulation process allowing people to adjust to and select their environment, and it can be improved by specific psychological interventions.

### **References and Further Reading**

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SEE ALSO: Adaptive behavior; Coping mechanisms; Flexibility; Self-Regulation Theory

### **Biography**

Dr. Jérôme Rossier is currently full professor of vocational and career counseling psychology at the Institute of Psychology of the University of Lausanne. He is the editor of the *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance* and member of several editorial boards of scientific journals such as the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* or the *Journal of Research in Personality*. He recently co-edited the *Handbook of life design: From practice to theory and from theory to practice*. He participated actively in many international research projects, such as the international career adaptability project.