General Principles

Career
Transition
Series

Paper 1

About the career transition series

About these guides

These guides are a nine-part series developed to share research-led practices on career transitions to help support mentally healthy workplaces. In this series, you will find best practice strategies along with the stories of organisations supporting their people through eight key transitions. We share first-hand accounts of the career transitions many of us will experience in our lifetimes, whether it is having a baby or a career change, a personal crisis, or retiring from the workforce altogether.

Why these guides exist

Developed by the National Mental Health Commission in partnership with Transitioning Well, these guides emerged as part of the National Workplace Initiative (NWI) after early research and consultation highlighted the toll of a number of career transition points on the mental health of employees. These guides are based on the findings of this Green Paper. They blend published research, insights from experts, and first-hand stories of individuals who have experienced or supported their people through transitions. We thank everyone who contributed to these guides and the organisations who permitted us to share their unique stories.

What these guides aim to do

- Recognise the impact of career transitions on workplaces and workers

- Inform workplace leaders and individuals about the importance of supporting transitions throughout the career journey

- Showcase how organisations can support workers across the life cycle in helping to promote and sustain mental health at work

- Share inspiring examples of forward-thinking organisations implementing research-led practices to proactively support career transitions.

Organisational-led approaches to support mentally healthy workplaces

Introduction

Whether it is entering the workforce for the first time or moving into retirement, our working lives are always changing. Whatever our roles and stage in life, we know that work and life changes and the associated career transitions can be challenging for our mental health and wellbeing. However, despite the many challenges, transitions also provide a unique opportunity for organisations to proactively support their employees in creating a mentally healthy workplace.

Why do transitions impact people?
Nancy K Schlossberg, a leading expert in transitions and career development, defines a transition as "any event or non-event that changes our roles, relationships, routines and assumptions. It includes the process of moving from what is known, going through a time of uncertainty, and eventually adapting to the new situation".[2]

Many of these work-life changes are normal and expected; others are unanticipated or surprising. Some are clear and sudden, while others are less clear and develop over time. Even non-events, or things that we thought would happen (e.g. getting a promotion and having a baby) but do not, can be challenging.

All these transitions bring about disruption in our experiences of work and can be a risk to our physical and mental health and wellbeing. Specifically, as we transition through changes, we experience an adjustment period which involves letting go of the old situation and adjusting to the new.

The Global Commission on the Future of Work is calling for more investment to support people through life's transitions.[1]

What is transition?

In navigating career transitions, it is useful to consider the difference between transition and change.

Change

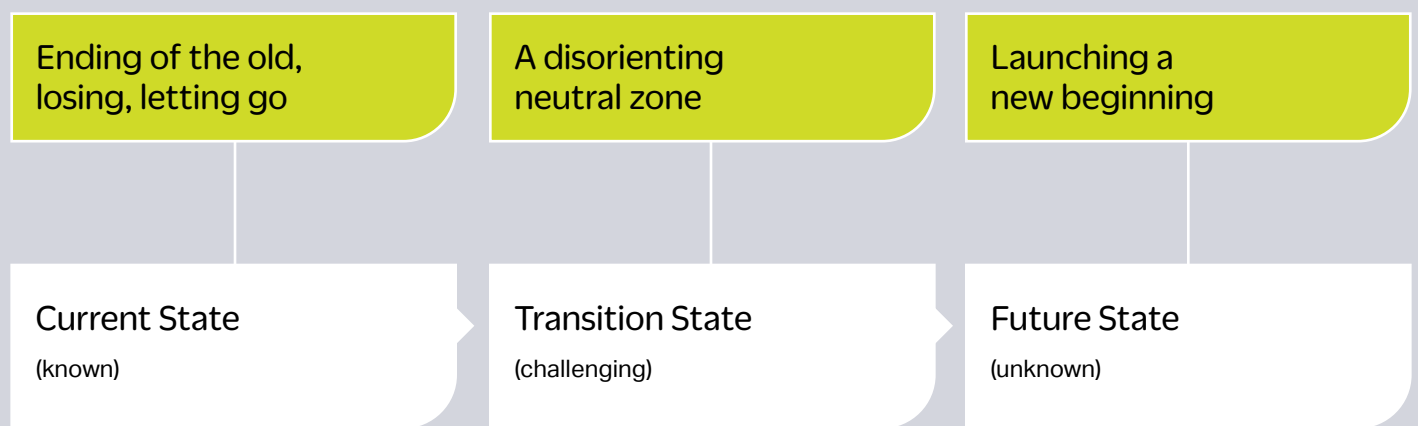is what happens to us (i.e. a promotion, a new baby, retirement).

Transition

is the process we each go through, as an individual, to adapt to the changes—in other words, moving from what is known ('current state'), to what is unknown ('future state'). We all need to go through a transition period to find our 'new normal', and this is often uncomfortable and challenging.

"Change is the external event or situation that takes place: a new business strategy, a turn in leadership, a merger, or a new product. Transition is the inner psychological process that people go through as they come to terms with the new situation."

- William Bridges

What is transition?[3]

Ending of the old, losing, letting go	A disorienting neutral zone	Launching a new beginning
Current State (known)	**Transition State** (challenging)	**Future State** (unknown)

Common career transitions points

"Today, employees don't want to be seen as workers. They want to be seen as complex human beings with rich, full lives."

Aaron McEwan, Gartner

Based on research and practice wisdom, this Career Transition Series highlights a number of major career transition points across the life span including:

1. **Entering the workforce and young workers:**
   Whether the first paid role or moving into career-type roles as an apprentice or graduate.

2. **Learning to lead:**
   Becoming a leader, supervisor or manager.

3. **Parenting and caring:**
   Taking on and managing caring responsibilities, such as parenting or family-based care.

4. **Redundancy and career changes:**
   Where roles are made redundant, or where one chooses to shift to a new career direction.

5. **Health-related changes:**
   Health and physical changes conditions, such as cancer or illness, menopause or gender-affirmation.

6. **Relocation:**
   Whether moving within Australia to a new state or city, or moving to another country for work.

7. **Crises and career shocks:**
   Unanticipated events, including the death of a loved one, divorce/separation, work or personal crises or major disasters such as fires, floods, droughts or pandemics.

8. **Late career and retirement:**
   Late career and transitions into retirement from paid work.

Click here to read more on each Career Transition Point in this series

General principles to support transition

Organisations that provide proactive support to individuals experiencing transitions can not only protect and promote people's mental health and wellbeing but can also increase productivity, enrich organisational culture, attract and retain talent, and mitigate workplace risk.

⚬ For Organisations

Build inclusive policies and practices
Organisational policies and practices can be designed to include, rather than exclude, team members and support transitions. Examples include supporting general boundary management (e.g. avoiding meeting times that are hard for those with caring roles or health conditions), supporting and enabling remote working where possible, and using language that destigmatises change.

Supportive management
Managers have significant roles in supporting workers as they adapt to change. These include:

- managing with sensitivity and being aware of the different needs of team members
- being clear about what is needed,
- creating a team environment where reasonable work demands are balanced with autonomy and support.

Support flexible work arrangements
Workplace flexibility can help individuals make decisions about the way they work through many career transitions. This can include flexibility about how work is completed, hours and location of work where possible, and allowing individuals to determine their preferred ways of working and boundaries. Emphasising results, rather than visible hours worked, allows individuals to find the best ways of delivering what is needed.

Know the demographics of your organisation
Understanding who is in your organisation enables you to predict and plan for likely transitions in your workforce. For example, if you have a large group of young workers, planning support around adjusting to the workforce, such as trainee or graduate programs, may be important.

Tailor approaches locally for individuals and teams
Local managers and supervisors set the tone and culture within their teams and work areas. As such, the responsibility for creating flexibility and autonomy at work sits at the local level. Managers and supervisors can promote personal control in how staff get the work done and ensure that team members know about and can access relevant supports.

Build a learning culture
When we are aiming for perfection, we may be scared to try new ways of working, for fear of failure. In contrast, organisational cultures that take a 'fail fast' approach and celebrate learning as an ongoing process allow workers to trial new approaches and roles and find the best ways for them to adapt to changes.

Take a person-centred approach
It is vital to put the individual experiencing transition at the centre of decisions that impact them. This allows them to express what they need and want, establish their preferred boundaries and make changes at a self-directed pace. If in doubt, ask, do not assume we know that everyone's experience and personal circumstances are unique.

> "Ask, do not Assume"

Normalise experiences of change and transition
We all go through various changes in our working lives and will experience at least some career transitions. Talking about this as part of career lifecycles helps to remove the stigma associated with some transitions and allows individuals to accept that there is a range of responses they may experience. This can also help individuals to adapt and seek support as and when they need to.

4 Ways organisations can provide support

In addition to the above principles, it is also important to consider the ways that organisations can provide transition support including access to policies and procedures alongside practical, social and emotional support.

1. **Access to policies and practices**, including workplace entitlements for specific transitions should be easily accessible to all staff. Documents, such as parental leave policies, can be part of the organisation's on-boarding or in-boarding kit and available to all employees on the company intranet. Individuals contemplating change may feel uncomfortable having to announce this to their manager to seek information. They should be able to access information about entitlement and support independently.

2. **Practical support** can be tailored to individual transitions. This could be presented as a change pack, tip sheets and/or links and resources for those navigating change, and should be provided in formats that are available to all staff, including those in operational, site or office-based roles.

3. **Social Support** offers connection and advice in times of need and helps reframe identity. Workplace peer-support groups (e.g. parent/carer groups, new leadership circles, mentors and buddies) can offer access to social support.

4. **Emotional Support** includes access to wellbeing programs, coaching and Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) from professional providers. This can also include specialist transition support and clear referral pathways for those who are finding transition difficult. Career coaching, training and resources can also help individuals self-manage their own career journeys. A range of resources are important, as some employees may be reluctant to access EAPs due to the stigma attached to help-seeking or concerns about confidentiality.
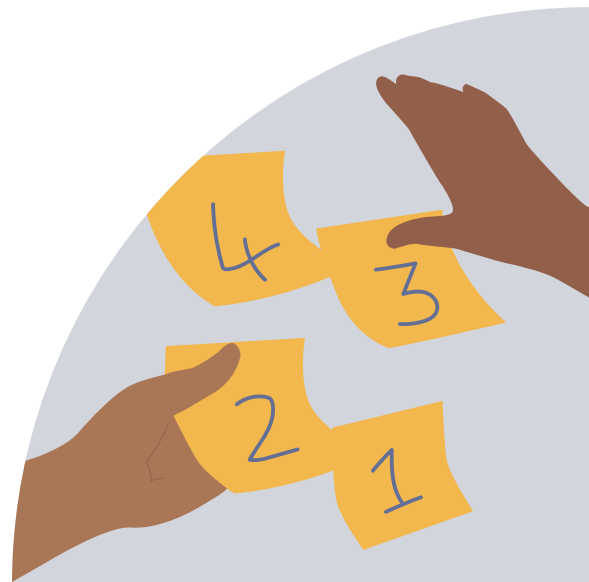
General principles to support transition

👤 For Individuals

An individual's ability to cope in times of transition can depend on many factors. Examples include socioeconomic status, family and community networks as well as workplace support.

To help provide a useful framework to better understand these factors, Schlossberg's Transition theory identifies four major sets of factors that can influence a person's ability to cope with a transition: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies, known as the 4 S's.[5]

As workplaces seek to support the many varied career transitions, it is important to consider these factors in addition to the organisational strategies discussed above.

Situation	Self	Support	Strategies
The characteristics of the event or non-event:	**Personal and demographic characteristics:**	**The support network around the individual:**	**The individual's existing coping responses etc.:**
• Timing	• Gender	• Family	• Reframing
• Role change	• Age	• Friends	• Self-care
• Control	• Socioeconomic status	• Close relationships	• Modifying the situation
• Duration	• Ethnicity	• Community	• Controlling meaning
• Previous experience	• Health	• Workplace	• Managing stress
• Responsibility	• Values	• Wider networks	
• Stress levels	• Resilience		
	• Spirituality		

Worth a read and watch

Overwhelmed: Coping With Life's Ups And Downs,
Nancy Schlossberg, 2008

The secret to mastering life's biggest transitions,
Bruce Feiler, 2022
Watch here: https://www.ted.com/talks/bruce_feiler_
the_secret_to_mastering_life_s_biggest_transitions

Read more in this series:

Paper 1
Career Transitions Series: General Principles

Paper 2
Career Transition Series: Entering the Workforce and Young Worker Transitions

Paper 3
Career Transition Series: Learning to Lead *(this guide)*

Paper 4
Career Transition Series: Parenting and Caring

Paper 5
Career Transition Series: Redundancy and Career Change

Paper 6
Career Transitions Series: Health-Related Changes

Paper 7
Career Transition Series: Relocation

Paper 8
Career Transitions Series: Crisis and Career Shocks

Paper 9
Career Transitions Series: Late Career and Retirement

Click here to read the other papers in this series

References

1   ILO. Global Commission on the Future of Work. Work for a Brighter Future.; 2019. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---cabinet/documents/publication/wcms_662410.pdf

2   Anderson ML, Goodman J, Schlossberg NK. Counseling adults in transition : linking Schlossberg's theory with practice in a diverse world. New York: Springer Pub; 2012.

3   Bridges W. Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change [Internet]. Google Books. Nicholas Brealey; 2003 [cited 2023 Feb 27]. Available from: https://books.google.com.au/books/about/Managing_Transitions.html?id=CO2nPwAACAAJ&redir_esc=y

4   Kessler, R. C., Amminger, G. P., Aguilar-Gaxiola, S., Alonso, J., Lee, S., & Ustun, T. B. (2007). Age of onset of mental disorders: a review of recent literature. Current opinion in psychiatry, 20(4), 359.

5   Anderson ML, Goodman J, Schlossberg NK. Counseling adults in transition : linking Schlossberg's theory with practice in a diverse world. New York: Springer Pub; 2012.

This resource was created as part of the National Workplace Initiative.

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