

# Intelligent Career Navigation

**Uncertain times call for a different way of thinking.**

By Kirsten M. Poulsen and Michael B. Arthur

WE LIVE IN AN UNCERTAIN world. New technologies, global trade, widespread relocation of manufacturing and services, and the rapid growth of electronic commerce all suggest uncertainty is here to stay. What implications does that pose for our careers, and how can we better understand those implications?

First, ours is a knowledge-driven economy. New knowledge is persistently creating and interacting with new technology, leaving behind long-established ways of working and inviting a major shift in the way we see the economic world. Much of the uneasiness we experience revolves around questions of what knowledge is being generated, and where.

Second, the subjective career reigns supreme. In an unpredictable world, our subjective careers—our passions, motivations, identities, and attachments to others—provide continuity of meaning and purpose. The subjective career takes precedence over any objective career—that is, any pre-ordained sequence of occupational or organizational seniority—that we relied on in more stable times.

Many professionals, however, haven't realized the implications of the knowledge-driven economy for themselves, their clients, or their organizations. How can we better navigate our careers, and help other people navigate their careers, in the years ahead?

## The intelligent organization

If you look inside the “intelligent enterprise” (the ideal knowledge-driven organization), you'll find three key attributes:

**Culture.** The organization's culture reflects its vision, mission, and shared values. It shapes how people inside and outside the organization work together.

**Capabilities.** The organization delivers goods or services through its overall skills and knowledge.

**Connections.** The organization engages its host industry through its internal (employees) and external (suppliers, customers, and partners) connections.

Those three attributes are interdependent. For example, an organizational culture that emphasizes customer orientation will affect people's motivation to develop new customer-focused capabilities. Those new capabilities will, in turn, influence the organization's connections with its suppliers and customers. The changed connections will make new demands that will either reinforce or challenge the organization's existing culture, which again will require developing new capabilities. Organizations that are aware of those interconnections can actively monitor the three attributes to anticipate impending economic changes.

## The intelligent career

The idea of the intelligent career picks up where the intelligent organization leaves off. The intelligent career framework involves three “ways of knowing,” which are concerned with

- why we work—our motivation, values, and identity
- how we work—our application of skills and knowledge
- with whom we work—our relationships, reputations, and career supports.

The three ways of knowing correspond to and interact with the culture,

capabilities, and connections of employer organizations. However, the correspondence is general rather than specific. There's an invitation for each of us to engage in a deeper, inherently subjective interpretation of our own career situations and to consider how our careers might unfold in a variety of possible employment situations.

The three ways of knowing are also interdependent. For example, a love of traveling might lead you to want to study languages: knowing-why to knowing-how. Once you start learning a language, you might want to meet with people from another culture who speak that language: knowing-how to knowing-whom. Meeting people from another culture might lead you to explore new career possibilities that you wouldn't have anticipated before: knowing-whom to knowing-why.

Individuals who are aware of those connections are better prepared to both seek out and benefit from potential career opportunities.

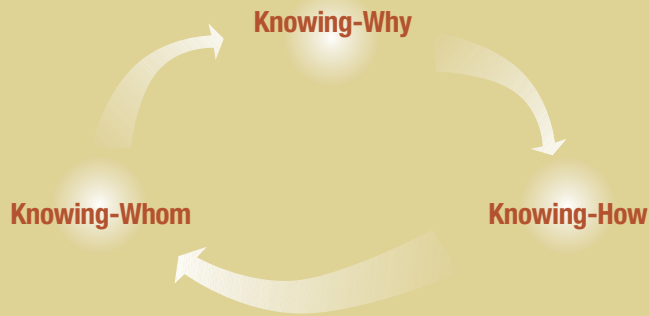
## Getting our career bearings

Consider your own career through the lens of the three ways of knowing. What's going on with your career right now? What can you say about your investments so far in each of the ways of knowing? What can you say about the links between them? How can you get your career bearings?

One approach is to reflect on statements relevant to each of the ways of knowing, perhaps in collaboration with a career consultant or coach. Typically, the same statement will mean different things to different people. For example, “I like to gain a sense of achievement from my work,” may involve climbing the organizational ladder for one person; while for another person, it may involve being respected by one's peers. The different meanings are components of the different subjective careers of the people involved.

Let's look at the case of Katarina, a successful organizational development consultant who cares deeply about the work that she does and the impact that it has. She identified a series of state-

## Three Ways of Knowing



### Selected Statements Identified by Katarina, an OD Consultant: Knowing-Why

- I like the feeling of sheer excitement in my work.
- I choose to try things others think are difficult or impossible.

### Knowing-How

- I pursue qualifications and skills that make me distinctive.
- I seek to learn from the projects in which I participate.

### Knowing-Whom

- I maintain or develop relationships to provide support.
- I develop relationships as a go-between among others.

The statements are drawn from the ICCS Career Exploration Exercise. More information about this exercise is available at [www.intelligentcareer.com](http://www.intelligentcareer.com)

ments, including the ones shown in the sidebar on page 78. In reviewing those statements, she observed the following:

**Knowing-Why.** Katarina spoke about how a “feeling of sheer excitement” came from a sense she was truly making a difference in people’s lives. Also, “to try things others think are difficult or impossible” was important to test whether she was at the cutting edge of her field.

**Knowing-How.** Katarina spoke about how “to pursue qualifications and skills that make her distinctive” was tied to the kind of work that she took on. Much of her learning was derived from “the projects in which she participates,” so the choice and range of projects was critical for her unfolding career.

**Knowing-Whom.** Katarina emphasized the importance of “relationships to provide support” to the people she took on as clients. She also frequently found herself acting as “a go-between among others,” where those others might be

collaborating consultants or middle managers of the organization she was helping.

When she worked to reflect on those items, Katarina volunteered that she felt she had “too many balls in the air” and that both her temperament and enthusiasm for new ideas left her struggling to satisfy the high expectations she held for herself. The observation helped her to find her bearings in her present career.

What Katarina needed to do was shift her perspective. With help from her coach, she began to see herself as a skilled juggler. As such, she could take more responsibility for each ball—each new project—she brought into play. She could also stay more focused on keeping her overall selection of active projects in balance.

### Navigating our career futures

Katarina was now better able to vis-

ualize the future. She next looked at her professional relationships (knowing-whom) and at which of them was most contributing to her skill development (knowing-how), as opposed to making her feel overwhelmed. She looked at her inner motivation (knowing-why) to ask what kind of projects she derived most satisfaction from. Katarina monitored and then modified her daily behavior to better act and feel like a skilled juggler. She has now taken charge of her own intelligent career—and of the new investments she’s making in it.

Insights of the kind Katarina gained can also be brought about through company-based workshops. Moreover, organizations that sponsor those workshops can benefit from giving their employees the opportunity to reflect on how their careers relate to the culture, capabilities, and connections that the organization is working to develop.

An example is a global information technology company with a majority of young engineers among its employees. Like other companies in the same business, the organization had become accustomed to high growth rates, an expanding workforce, and almost automatic promotions and salary increases for several years. Suddenly, the market changed, and, without continuing company growth, further career opportunities dwindled. The young engineers who were used to the company taking care of their career success became frustrated. The company needed to create a new culture, and, within it, a new understanding about careers to avoid losing key employees.

The company decided to run internal workshops to help all employees find their career bearings and to explain that they, as individuals, needed to take charge of their future careers.

The workshops were designed around the concept of intelligent careers, and they helped the employees

- find new identification with their profession and the technical challenges that it faced (knowing-why)
- determine their individual learning agendas (knowing-how)

- value the collegueship associated with working together on new projects (knowing-whom).

It wasn't easy for every employee to accept that change in perspective. There was, and is, some resistance to this new thinking. However, the word is spreading, and the organization anticipates seeing improved results in the key indicators of higher job satisfaction and lower turnover among its most valuable employees.

### **A final word**

The emergent and knowledge-driven economy insists on constant change in the way organizations function and in the career opportunities that arise. It is imperative that organizations and individuals are aware of—and able to succeed in—the economic circumstances of our time.

The concept of intelligent careers provides a way for individuals to find their bearings and personally navigate their careers. At the same time, it allows organizations to gain a better understanding of the diversity of their employees—their different dreams, talents, and attachments—and to provide for career coaching that benefits both parties.

**Kirsten M. Poulsen** is founder and owner of the consulting company KMP & Partners in Copenhagen, Denmark; [kmp@kmp-partners.com](mailto:kmp@kmp-partners.com). **Michael B. Arthur** is a professor of management at Suffolk University in Boston; [marthur@intelligentcareer.com](mailto:marthur@intelligentcareer.com).