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From Employment to Entrepreneurship: Career Adaptation, Entrepreneurial Identity, and the Theory of Adaptive Career Shift

Del empleo al emprendimiento: adaptación profesional, identidad emprendedora y la teoría del cambio de carrera adaptativo

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the lived experiences of individuals who transitioned from employment to entrepreneurship in Southern Leyte, Philippines, and generates a theory rooted in the participants' narratives. To achieve this, the study combined two qualitative approaches: descriptive phenomenology as a methodological perspective and grounded theory as the data analysis technique. Through in-depth interviews with ten entrepreneurs across diverse sectors, four major themes emerged: Disruption Igniting New Path, Strategic Journey of Subtle Transition, Embracing Self-Direction and Control, and Harmony with Values and Inner Purpose. Findings reveal that while external crises, such as job loss and pandemic-related disruptions, acted as initial triggers, internal motivations, including autonomy, personal values, and purpose, significantly influenced participants' decisions. The research concluded with the Theory of Adaptive Career Shift, in which entrepreneurial transition is a dynamic process shaped by external disruptions and internal desires, resulting in personal and professional reinvention. This research contributes a human-centered perspective to career development literature, emphasizing entrepreneurship as both a practical and existential path to self-actualization.

Keywords: entrepreneurial transition; career adaptability; entrepreneurial identity; hybrid entrepreneurship; career transition.

JEL Code: L26; M13; J24; J62.



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RESUMEN

El estudio explora las experiencias de personas que pasaron del empleo al emprendimiento en Leyte del Sur, Filipinas, y desarrolla una teoría a partir de las narrativas de los participantes. Para lograrlo, el estudio combinó dos enfoques cualitativos: la fenomenología descriptiva como perspectiva metodológica y la teoría fundamentada como técnica de análisis de datos. A través de entrevistas exhaustivas con diez emprendedores de diversos sectores, surgieron cuatro temas principales: la disrupción abre un nuevo camino, el viaje estratégico de la transición sutil, la adopción de la autodirección y el control, y la armonía con los valores y el propósito interior. Los hallazgos revelan que, si bien las crisis externas, como la pérdida de empleo y las disrupciones relacionadas con la pandemia, actuaron como detonantes iniciales, las motivaciones internas, como la autonomía, los valores personales y el propósito, influyeron de manera significativa en las decisiones de los participantes. La investigación concluyó con la Teoría del Cambio de Carrera Adaptativo, según la cual la transición emprendedora es un proceso no lineal, influido por disrupciones externas y deseos internos, que conduce a la reinención personal y profesional. Esta investigación aporta una perspectiva centrada en el ser humano a la literatura sobre desarrollo profesional, enfatizando el emprendimiento como una vía práctica y existencial hacia la autorrealización.

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Palabras clave: transición emprendedora; adaptabilidad profesional; identidad emprendedora; emprendimiento híbrido; transición profesional.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, more individuals have considered becoming entrepreneurs in response to changing industry requirements, work preferences, and technological advancements, or simply to increase household income. As such, some engage in entrepreneurial ventures while working—entrepreneurs often work for other organizations before starting entrepreneurial activity—while others leave their regular jobs to start their own businesses. The transition from employment to entrepreneurship is seen not only in cities but in rural areas as well. According to Barber et al. (2021), rural regions offer unique economic and structural opportunities for prospective entrepreneurs, including those who have left or plan to leave paid employment. The province of Southern Leyte in the Philippines is one rural area that has seen growth in entrepreneurial activities. In 2023, the province's economy grew by 7.3%, driven by growth in industries such as construction, agriculture, and wholesale and retail trade (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2024).

Although entrepreneurship offers potential benefits, the decision to transition from employee to full-time entrepreneur can significantly affect individuals' finances, careers, and personal well-being. Individuals who choose to embark on an entrepreneurial career enter an often solitary, 'sink or swim' environment laden with risk and uncertainty (Liguori et al., 2020). Because entrepreneurship is dynamic and uncertain, it is necessary to evaluate and understand entrepreneurial transition through the lens of individuals who have personally experienced the process.

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Recent studies emphasized that entrepreneurial transition is not merely a change in occupation but a complex career process influenced by personal aspirations, identity development, and changing work conditions. As careers become increasingly dynamic and less linear, individuals are more likely to reassess traditional employment pathways and explore entrepreneurship as an alternative way to achieve professional growth, autonomy, and personal fulfillment (Marshall & Gigliotti, 2020; Fossen & Sorgner, 2021). This suggests that entrepreneurial transition should be understood not only as an economic decision but also as an important career development process.

Another area that has received growing attention is entrepreneurial identity. Existing research suggests that entrepreneurial identity aspirations, particularly when combined with significant work-related events, can influence individuals' decisions to pursue entrepreneurship (Seibert et al., 2021). Entrepreneurial transition extends beyond opportunity recognition and financial considerations, often involving self-discovery, personal reflection, and identity reconstruction. Such findings highlight the importance of examining

entrepreneurial transition through the lived experiences of those who have personally undergone the process (Murnieks et al., 2020).

Moreover, recent literature has also strengthened the understanding of hybrid entrepreneurship as a pathway toward full-time entrepreneurial engagement. While some individuals leave employment immediately to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities, others gradually transition by simultaneously maintaining employment while operating a business venture (Raffiee & Feng, 2014). This approach allows aspiring entrepreneurs to gain experience, test opportunities, and reduce financial risks before fully committing to entrepreneurship (Block & Landgraf, 2016a; Ferreira, 2020). These findings suggest that entrepreneurial transition may occur through different pathways and adaptive strategies rather than a single, uniform process.

While previous studies have identified the factors and motivations that may prompt an individual to shift from paid employment to entrepreneurship, scant literature has explored the lived experiences of individuals who have undergone the transition, especially in rural areas. While entrepreneurial transition has received growing scholarly attention, relatively fewer studies have examined the phenomenon within rural contexts. Existing research suggests that entrepreneurial experiences in rural settings may differ from those observed in urban environments due to variations in employment opportunities, economic structures, community networks, and access to entrepreneurial resources (Barber et al., 2021). Consequently, findings derived from rural contexts contribute important insights that may not be fully captured in studies conducted primarily in urban or highly industrialized settings.

Moreover, most studies to date have relied on large-scale numerical analyses through surveys, with little attention to narratives and lived experiences, indicating a methodological gap. The literature also offers few theories that describe the phenomenon of entrepreneurial transition.

This paper addressed these gaps by uncovering the experiences of those who have undergone the transition process and developing a new theoretical perspective grounded in participants' lived experiences. It contributes to the growing body of knowledge on entrepreneurial transition by providing a contextually grounded understanding of how individuals navigate the shift from traditional employment to entrepreneurship. The insights generated may inform educators, policymakers, entrepreneurship support institutions, and future researchers seeking to better understand and support entrepreneurial transition within similar contexts.

Atheoretical Stance

This study employs an atheoretical approach to investigating the experiences of individuals who transitioned from traditional employment to entrepreneurship. Rather than relying on

preconceived notions or established theoretical frameworks, this approach lets the data guide the discovery process. Three primary methodologies—open discovery, as it explored the phenomenon with no preconceived assumptions; data-driven strategy, as results are based on the lived experiences and viewpoints of the participants and evidence rather than preconceived notions; and inductive reasoning, as the study utilized gathered data and information to create new theories or models that offer novel insights into the field.

Philosophical Stance

This study explores the experiences of individuals in Southern Leyte, Philippines who have transitioned from traditional employment to entrepreneurship. It is anchored in constructivist epistemology, relativist ontology, axiology, and pragmatism. Taken as a whole, these components outline the fundamental beliefs and assumptions that guide the study strategy.

Domain of inquiry

The study explores and describes the lived experiences of individuals who have transitioned from traditional employment to entrepreneurship, and generates theoretical insights from these experiences that contribute to the field of entrepreneurship studies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, utilizing a descriptive phenomenology approach. Descriptive phenomenology investigates the essence of how phenomena are consciously experienced (Giorgi, 2006). It is designed to explore and understand people's experiences of a particular phenomenon. Because this study aimed to explore the experiences of individuals who transitioned from traditional employment to entrepreneurship, this research design allowed the researcher to deeply understand respondents' journeys and the meanings they attached to the phenomenon they experienced.

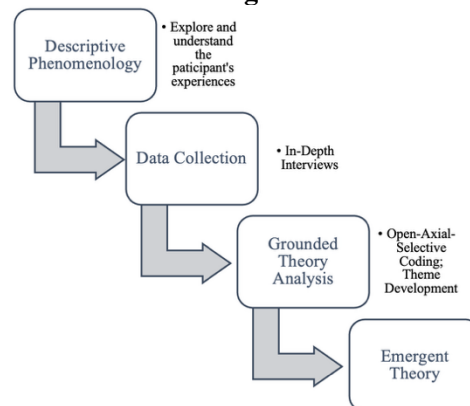
Descriptive phenomenology serves as the overarching methodological orientation for accessing lived experience, while selected grounded-theory coding procedures are used as an analytical strategy for conceptual integration and theory generation. Thus, phenomenology guided the study in understanding and describing the meanings participants attached to their transition experiences, while grounded-theory procedures supported the systematic organization, comparison, and integration of these experiences into categories, themes, and an emergent theoretical explanation.

Figure 1 below illustrates the study design framework, beginning with a descriptive phenomenological understanding of participants' experiences, followed by data collection

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and grounded-theory procedures for analysis and theory generation. The combined use of these approaches offered an extensive and well-founded investigation of the phenomenon.

Figure 1
Research Design Framework



Source: Own elaboration.

Environment

This study was conducted in the province of Southern Leyte, Philippines. Such a location was chosen based on the following criteria: (1) rural area; (2) developing economy; and (3) observed rise of entrepreneurship. By focusing on this location, the study captures the unique experiences of entrepreneurs in the rural setting, contributing to a more localized understanding of the entrepreneurial transition process. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in a place favored by the participants where they felt most comfortable sharing their experiences. Virtual interviews were conducted through Google Meet and MS Teams.

Key Informants and Sampling

A purposive sampling technique was used, as the study included only individuals who have transitioned from employees to full-time entrepreneurs. Purposive sampling was used because respondents must have direct experience relevant to the study's objectives. Participant selection was guided by the following Inclusion and Exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria: (1) of legal age and residents of Southern Leyte; (2) currently operating their own business; (3) have at least 5 years of entrepreneurial experience after leaving traditional employment; (4) willing to participate and give informed consent; and (5) able to articulate their transition experience.

Exclusion Criteria: (1) below 18 years old and non-residents of Southern Leyte; (2) operating their own business but still working; (3) less than 5 years of entrepreneurial experience after leaving traditional employment; (4) unwilling to participate and give informed consent; and (5) unable to articulate their transition experience.

The study initially targeted 8-12 participants; however, saturation was achieved with the tenth participant. After interviewing the 10th participant, no new themes or insights emerged. This indicated that the data was sufficient to capture the phenomenon. The participants, who had left their jobs and managed their entrepreneurial ventures for five years or more, are in their 30s to late 40s. They formerly worked in different jobs across various industries, such as academia, engineering, architecture, nursing, hospitality, and IT.

Qualitative Data Analysis

This study used grounded theory procedures to analyze the data. Grounded theory is a systematic qualitative approach that generates theory inductively from empirical data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). While the study adopted descriptive phenomenology to explore and describe the lived experiences of individuals who transitioned from employment to entrepreneurship, grounded theory procedures were used during the analytical phase to facilitate theme development and theory emergence.

The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. Consistent with descriptive phenomenology, the researcher bracketed personal assumptions and biases to focus on the meanings participants conveyed (Giorgi, 2009). The analytical process subsequently followed grounded theory coding procedures to organize, interpret, and synthesize the data into meaningful categories and theoretical insights. The study likewise adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of trustworthiness to ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. The study maintained an audit trail throughout to document the progression of the analysis from significant statements to formulated meanings, subthemes, themes, and theory development. A structured codebook and iterative theme refinement provided transparency in analytical decisions and facilitated traceability from raw data to the emergent theory.

Coding and Theory Development Process

The analysis followed a systematic coding process that supported theme development and theory generation. After transcription, the interview data were reviewed repeatedly to become familiar with the participants' narratives and gain a holistic understanding of their entrepreneurial transition experiences. Significant statements related to the phenomenon were identified and extracted from the transcripts.

During the open coding stage, significant statements were assigned formulated meanings that captured the essence of the participants' experiences. These formulated meanings served as the initial conceptual labels derived directly from the participants' narratives. Examples included forced exit due to job instability, entrepreneurial interest even before employment, autonomy and flexibility, and making a difference by helping others. The coding process

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remained closely grounded in the participants' own accounts to preserve the meanings embedded in their experiences.

During axial coding, conceptually related formulated meanings were grouped into subthemes. This process allowed the researcher to identify recurring patterns and relationships across participants' experiences. Subthemes such as job loss and employment instability, freedom over time and decision-making, finding purpose through impact, and early entrepreneurial exposure or interest emerged during this stage. In the selective coding stage, related subthemes were integrated into broader thematic categories. The table 1 illustrates the coding process.

Table 1
Illustration of the Coding Process

Significant Statement	Formulated Meaning	Subtheme	Themes
"They started laying people off..."	Forced Exit due to Job Instability	Job Loss and Employment Instability	Disruption and Opportunity During the Pandemic
"There's no boss, no reports..."	Control Over Work Environment	Freedom over Time and Decision-Making	Increased Autonomy and Control
"I had a dream and a clear vision..."	Entrepreneurial Interest Even Before Work	Early Entrepreneurial Exposure or Interest	Alignment with Personal Values and Fulfillment
"You get to help others..."	Making a Difference by Helping Others	Finding Purpose Through Impact	Strategic Transition and Gradual Shift

Source: Own elaboration.

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Through iterative comparison and abstraction, preliminary themes were refined to better capture the underlying entrepreneurial transition process reflected in the participants' narratives, as shown in Table 2. This process ultimately led to the final thematic structure and the emergence of the Theory of Adaptive Career Shift. The theory was generated inductively from the data and reflects the interconnected experiences, meanings, and adaptive responses described by the participants. Through iterative comparison and integration of the themes, the study identified broader theoretical elements to explain how entrepreneurial transition unfolds as a process.

Table 2
Refinement of Preliminary Themes into Final Themes

Preliminary Themes	Final Themes	Rationale for Refinement
Disruption and Opportunity During the Pandemic	Disruption Igniting New Path	Expanded beyond pandemic-specific experiences to capture broader forms of disruption and career redirection described by participants.
Increased Autonomy and Control	Embracing Self-Direction and Control	Better reflected participants' emphasis on empowerment, autonomy, and decision-making authority.
Alignment with Personal Values and Fulfillment	Harmony with Values and Inner Purpose	Captured the deeper meaning-making, purpose, and value alignment expressed in participants' narratives.
Strategic Transition and Gradual Shift	Strategic Journey of Subtle Transition	Emphasized the process-oriented and evolving nature of entrepreneurial transition.

Source: Developed from the study codebook and theme refinement process.

These theoretical elements synthesized the themes' underlying relationships into a coherent explanatory framework. Consequently, the Theory of Adaptive Career Shift emerged as an interpretation of how the themes interacted to shape the participants' transition from employment to entrepreneurship.

Ethical Consideration

This study strictly adhered to established ethical standards and guidelines to protect participants' rights and dignity. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional review board before the data collection commenced. Participation was voluntary, and participants signed the consent form before the interview process began. An orientation session was conducted to demonstrate the study's purpose, risks, benefits, interview guidelines, and other relevant information to the participants. To maintain confidentiality, participants were assigned unique identification numbers, and any identifying information such as names and addresses was omitted from transcripts. Interview data, including recordings, were securely stored on a password-protected device to prevent unauthorized access. All recordings were permanently deleted and destroyed after data/thematic analysis. In addition, the researcher practiced reflexivity to avoid personal biases throughout the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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This study explored the lived experiences of individuals transitioning from employment to entrepreneurship. Analysis of the interview data revealed four overarching themes, each capturing the participant's transition journey. Each theme was developed through subthemes highlighting specific motivations, supported by participants' verbatim accounts.

Theme 1: Disruption Igniting New Path

The first central theme of this study reveals that, despite being a disruptive force, the COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed career transformation. Initially, participants turned to entrepreneurship out of necessity, as some faced job loss and instability due to the lockdowns. However, the lockdowns also gave them the time and space to recast their career aspirations and discover something more profound and meaningful.

These findings corroborate recent research. Donthu and Gustafsson (2020) noted that the pandemic brought not only disruption but also innovation, particularly in the way people work, consume, and engage in business. They emphasized that many people, faced with economic instability, turned to entrepreneurship to adapt and survive. Similarly, Kuckertz et al. (2020) stated that crises also tend to trigger this kind of entrepreneurial thinking, forcing entrepreneurs to reassess their risks, priorities, and long-term goals. The first theme is broken down into three sub-themes.

Sub-theme 1.1: Job Loss and Employment Instability

Others experienced job loss or work-related challenges and risks during the pandemic. Some participants had a tough time traveling for work during the lockdowns because of restrictions. These trials forced them to become entrepreneurs as a secondary livelihood, so they could earn even from home. Participant 1 expressed:

“If not for the pandemic, I would have stayed. They started laying people off... That is when I decided to go full-time as an entrepreneur.”

This subtheme shows that the pandemic's abrupt economic crisis reorganized many people's lives by producing mass unemployment and insecurity. But for most, losing the security of a fixed income or missing out on hefty race contracts forced them to reconsider and rethink their career path. In this case, becoming an entrepreneur wasn't something these participants had planned; rather, it was a move born out of necessity. Their stories show that while the disruption was tough, it also created space — even if unplanned — for new beginnings and self-employment opportunities.

Sub-theme 1.2: Reallocation of Time and Priorities

126 The restrictions during the pandemic allowed participants more time at home, which they used to explore income-generating hobbies and small-scale businesses. Participant 3 shared:

“Since going abroad didn't push through and I wanted to spend more time with my family, I started the business... I believe it was a blessing from God.”

The extended lockdowns and work stoppages gave participants the time to reflect, something that they rarely had before as employees. Since traveling and other usual recreational or social activities were restricted, many found themselves reconnecting with family, focusing on self-care, or diving into hobbies that had long been set aside. This sub-theme shows how that unanticipated extra time became a crucial moment that sparked self-assessment, creativity, and the pursuit of endeavors that felt more personally satisfying.

Sub-theme 1.3: The Pandemic as a Catalyst for Reflection

Participants reassessed their professional priorities because the pandemic forced a pause, prompting them to reconsider their life goals and career pathways. Participant 6 conveyed:

“Eventually, I realized I needed to focus on the business... I knew I had to choose what I wanted in life.”

For the participants, the pandemic was not just an interruption. It was a pause so rare it sparked intense personal reflection. Away from daily routines and suddenly living at a slower pace, many had room to think about what actually mattered to them — among other things, their job satisfaction, personal goals, and well-being. Others found out that the work they had

been doing didn't match their values or ambitions. This pushed them to pursue things that felt more meaningful.

Theme 2: Strategic Journey of Subtle Transition

While it was argued at the beginning that individual participants were sometimes forced into opportunities by external triggers, the second theme suggests that entrepreneurial transition is often organized and multistage. It's not always crisis-driven but often a result of foresight, planning ahead, and life falling into place. Several participants explained how they "transitioned incrementally," focusing on their side business while they still worked, so they could minimize risk and prepare for the leap to full-time. This suggests a deliberate and considered form of entrepreneurship.

Some studies support this perspective. Block and Landgraf (2016b) note that "hybrid entrepreneurs" — those who start a business while still employed — benefit from valuable learning experiences and reduced risks, leading to smoother transitions. Similarly, Chlosta et al. (2012) highlight that entrepreneurship often forms part of a broader life strategy, one that takes into account timing, family responsibilities, and long-term security.

Sub-theme 2.1: Early Entrepreneurial Exposure or Interest

Some participants had an entrepreneurial inclination even while employed, seeing business as a long-term goal. Participant 2 shared:

"I had a dream and a clear vision. I knew I wasn't meant to work abroad or for someone else. ... I'd rather do business."

This sub-theme captures the participants' inclination and aspiration to have their own business even before they started their respective jobs. They carried this entrepreneurial inclination even while working, hoping for the perfect timing to pursue their dream business ventures. Their stories reflect a strong internal pull toward business, not as a backup plan, but as something they had always envisioned for themselves.

Sub-theme 2.2: Hybrid or Parallel Setup before Transition

Before leaving employment entirely, many ran their businesses part-time, minimizing financial risk while building experience. Participant 8 mentioned:

"Since I was doing business while working, I didn't prepare for the transition... shifting to full-time business was easier."

This sub-theme suggests that many participants transitioned through a hybrid entrepreneurship model, managing their business alongside their jobs. Though it was difficult, especially in terms of time management, this approach provided a safety net, enabling them to manage financial obligations while gradually learning business operations.

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It also enabled them to test the market, refine their offerings, and gain confidence without the immediate pressures of full-time entrepreneurship.

Sub-theme 2.3: Realization through Life Events or Milestones

Life events and milestones, such as family responsibilities and successful endeavors, were turning points in subtly pursuing entrepreneurship, as Participants 7 and 8 narrated:

“I did not leave the job immediately. I stepped away for personal reasons—specifically when I got pregnant with my first child.”

“Eventually, I decided to leave when my events business started taking off, especially with bigger national and international projects...so I focused on the business.”

For some participants, significant life events acted as catalysts for entrepreneurial transition. Participants perceived these moments as creating a sense of urgency or prompting a reevaluation of life goals, leading to a move toward full-time entrepreneurship. The shift was not necessarily planned in these cases, but the timing felt appropriate due to changes in personal priorities or circumstances.

Theme 3: Embracing Self-Direction and Control

128 The third theme of the study reveals how entrepreneurship gave participants not just monetary rewards, but also empowerment. It was not just about earning money, but about being in charge of their time, decisions, and boundaries. Many expressed having the gift of living more intentionally because of this newfound independence.

Stephan (2018) points out that entrepreneurship is likely associated with higher subjective well-being because it provides more control, more purposeful work, and better work-life reconciliation. Similarly, another study by Shir et al. (2019a) confirmed the extent to which autonomy and control over money can substantially improve psychological well-being and life satisfaction in entrepreneurs. This theme is likewise broken down into three sub-themes.

Sub-theme 3.1: Freedom over Time and Decision-Making

Respondents appreciated being their own boss for the freedom and independence it gave them to implement ideas without external limitations, as expressed by Participant 5:

“There is no boss, no reports, no fixed deadlines... That is the freedom I have now.”

This sub-theme suggests that, unlike more typical employment that might entail a set schedule and a hierarchy of decision-making, owning a business gave them the freedom to manage their time and make decisions. With the flexibility to shape their workday, their work environment increased their sense of ownership, job satisfaction, and productivity.

Sub-theme 3.2: Income Control and Financial Independence

Having a business allowed participants to set their earnings, unlike paid work with fixed rates of pay. Participant 1 explained:

“Being an entrepreneur feels very different — and much better... You also get to control your income, and that feels empowering.”

This sub-theme explains that another significant shift participants experienced was control over income. Unlike being an employee, wherein they earn a fixed income, having their own business allowed them to earn based on their effort, strategy, and performance, thus removing income limitations. Though they acknowledged the unpredictability of earnings, the potential for higher income and financial freedom outweighed the risks. This highlights how entrepreneurship served not only as a financial alternative but as a path to empowerment and self-reliance.

Sub-theme 3.3: Better Work-Life Balance

Entrepreneurship enabled participants to balance their professional and personal lives better, contributing to overall well-being, as reflected in Participant 8’s statement:

“As an entrepreneur, you have more time for yourself, your family, and your friends. That kind of work-life balance is something I truly value and would not trade.”

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Participants' stories revealed that one of the most important benefits of not being employed by anyone was the capacity to be more balanced in work and in life. Entrepreneurship was the entryway to that flexibility to build work around not only their families, but on their own terms and even in their leisure time. This independence was not simply about time; it was also about retaking control of their lives.

Theme 4: Harmony with Values and Inner Purpose

This fourth and final theme emphasizes that transitioning from a job to being your own boss was more than a career change; it was a deeply personal quest driven by value alignment. This alignment provided a degree of meaning that many had lacked in their professional lives. For them, entrepreneurship is not just about getting rich. It’s more about doing something that you love that can make an impact on others and on yourself.

Recent literature supports this idea. Shepherd and Patzelt (2018) label it “meaningful entrepreneurship”—the type of business venture that truly expresses one’s values and identity. Today’s entrepreneur is increasingly conceptualized as a purpose-driven individual, seeking to align their work with what meaningfully matters to them (Cardon et al., 2020). Additionally, scholars such as Fatoki (2020) highlight the significance of internal readiness in relation to the entrepreneurial process.

Sub-theme 4.1: Pursuit of Passion and Self-Fulfillment

Participants pointed to the joy and genuine, passionate motivation of working in jobs they loved, a characteristic absent from more traditional jobs. Participant 10 revealed:

“I’m much happier now... It’s harder because all the responsibility is on me, but the fulfillment and growth make it worth it.”

Participants described becoming an entrepreneur as, for many, the first value-creating work they would really enjoy—work that aligned with their skills, passions, and personal interests. This emotional connection made all the difference. It was a difference that felt like all the difference in the world - emotional connection. Their businesses were not just economic endeavors, but sources of pleasure, pride and personal expression.

Sub-theme 4.2: Finding Purpose through Impact

Some mentioned that their enterprises allowed them to do good in their community or in other people’s lives, making them feel like they’re contributing to something greater than themselves. Participant 3 disclosed:

“In business, the impact is much deeper. You get to help others. You create jobs... that is what changed my perspective... knowing I can make a difference in their lives.”

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This sub-theme shows that, for some, entering entrepreneurship became more than a personal affair; it became a chance to contribute to society at large. As these individuals developed as entrepreneurs, their perspectives broadened. They provided jobs, met the needs of their surrounding communities, and served as symbols of achievable success. They found tremendous satisfaction in making a difference in their own communities.

Sub-theme 4.3: Faith, Mindset, and Internal Readiness

Participants spoke of the inner transformation needed to leap—developing faith, mindset, and self-belief. Participant 2 highlighted:

“The transition was not easy... Life was not easy, but I always believed that if you are willing, you can earn.”

Participants emphasized the inner transformation required to embrace entrepreneurship. It involved more than just business planning—it was a test of resilience, faith, and mental preparedness. They pointed to the importance of spiritual grounding, positive thinking, and determination in facing uncertainties. This mindset shift enabled them to navigate risks and setbacks with confidence. In this context, entrepreneurship became as much a spiritual and personal growth journey as a professional one, highlighting the power of internal resources in driving external success. Table 3 below summarizes the four overarching themes (Disruption Igniting New Path, Strategic Journey of Subtle Transition, Embracing Self-

Direction and Control, Harmony with Values and Inner Purpose) capturing the nuanced experiences of individuals transitioning from traditional employment to entrepreneurship.

Table 3
Summary of Themes and Sub-themes

Theme	Subthemes	Description
Theme 1. Disruption Igniting New Path	Subtheme 1.1: Job Loss and Employment Instability	Job displacements and unstable work situations
	Subtheme 1.2: Reallocation of Time and Priorities	Shift in focus to family, health, and self.
	Subtheme 1.3: The Pandemic as a Catalyst for Reflection	Triggered personal and career reflection
Theme 2. Strategic Journey of Subtle Transition	Subtheme 2.1: Early Entrepreneurial Exposure or Interest	Sparked interest in business early in life or career
	Subtheme 2.2: Hybrid or Parallel Setup before Transition	Started a business while still employed
	Subtheme 2.3: Realization through Life Events or Milestones	Shift inspired by personal events or significant changes
Theme 3. Embracing Self-Direction and Control	Subtheme 3.1: Freedom over Time and Decision-making	Having control over one's time and choices
	Subtheme 3.2: Income Control and Financial Independence	Managing earnings and becoming self-reliant
	Subtheme 3.3: Better Work-Life Balance	Achieving a healthier mix of work and personal life
Theme 4. Harmony with Values and Inner Purpose	Subtheme 4.1: Pursuit of Passion and Self-Fulfillment	Engaging in work that aligns with personal interests and brings joy
	Subtheme 4.2: Finding Purpose through Impact	Feeling fulfilled by making a difference in others' lives
	Subtheme 4.3: Faith, Mindset, and Internal Readiness	Drawing strength from faith and a positive mindset to embrace change

Source: Own elaboration.

The findings of the present study share similarities with entrepreneurial transition research conducted in other settings. Studies in South Africa (Rugpath & Mamabolo, 2022), Europe (de Klerk et al., 2025), and the United States (Seibert et al., 2021) likewise emphasize the roles of career disruption, identity development, adaptability, and gradual entrepreneurial engagement. While contextual conditions differ, these parallels suggest that some aspects of entrepreneurial transition may transcend specific geographical settings.

Moreover, these findings suggest that entrepreneurial transition is shaped not only by individual motivations but also by the broader social, economic, and institutional contexts in which it occurs. Recent rural entrepreneurship research likewise suggests that local ecosystems, institutional conditions, and community resources often shape entrepreneurial opportunities and transition experiences (Candelario et al., 2024). Participants in this study were situated in a rural Philippine setting where employment opportunities, community networks, family responsibilities, and local economic conditions may have influenced how they experienced and navigated the transition from employment to entrepreneurship. Consistent with previous research, entrepreneurial transition does not occur in isolation; contextual factors may facilitate or constrain entrepreneurial action (Marshall & Gigliotti,

2020; Stephan, 2018). Consequently, the pathways described by the participants should be understood within the setting in which they emerged.

While similar patterns have been reported in studies of entrepreneurial transition, the present findings do not suggest that all transitions follow identical pathways. Rather, entrepreneurial transition is a dynamic process that may vary across geographical, cultural, and economic contexts. Therefore, the themes identified in this study should be viewed as contextually grounded insights that contribute to understanding entrepreneurial transition and provide a basis for future research in other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although the findings are contextually situated, their value lies in providing theoretical insights into how participants experienced and interpreted entrepreneurial transition, which may be transferable to contexts with similar social and economic conditions.

Emergent Theory: The Theory of Adaptive Career Shift

The four themes identified in the study served as the empirical foundation for theory development. Through theoretical integration and abstraction, the study identified broader theoretical elements to explain how entrepreneurial transition unfolds as a process. These elements represent the underlying mechanisms that connect participants' experiences and collectively explain the movement from traditional employment to entrepreneurship. Thus, the Theory of Adaptive Career Shift emerged as a process-oriented explanation grounded in the relationships among the themes.

“The Theory of Adaptive Career Shift posits that the transition from conventional employment to entrepreneurship emerges from external disruption and internal drive, culminating in a profound personal and professional reinvention.”

Rooted in individuals' real-life experiences and narratives, and based on emerging themes and sub-themes, this theory argues that entrepreneurial transitions are not merely responses to external, unexpected disruptions but also life-reinventing decisions shaped by changing priorities, personal aspirations, and adaptive strategies.

Four Interrelated Elements of the Theory of Adaptive Career Shift

1. Disruption as the Initial Spark

The process starts with an unexpected external event or disruption that affects an individual's employment stability. Consistent with the findings, disruption functioned as the triggering condition that prompted participants to reassess existing career trajectories and consider entrepreneurship as an alternative pathway. Rather than viewing uncertainty and instability as barriers, participants described entrepreneurship as a viable alternative career path through which they could respond to changing circumstances. As Donthu and Gustafsson (2020) and

Kuckertz et al. (2020) explain, people often become more innovative, flexible, and resilient in times of crises, often resulting in increased entrepreneurial activities.

2. *Pull of Autonomy and Self-Governance*

The desire and drive for self-governance grow stronger after the initial disruption. Individuals begin to want control over their environment, time, and the decisions they make. Walking away from work, all at once, is not simply a matter of leaving a job. Instead, it is about reclaiming one's person and life rhythm. This desire aligns with research from Stephan (2018), who found that entrepreneurial autonomy enhances overall well-being, and Shir et al. (2019b), who link it to psychological empowerment and increased motivation.

3. *Strategic Entry through Gradual Transition*

The third element reflects a measured, planned, and strategic approach to entrepreneurial transition. Many have started and managed their business while still working. They build their businesses while their jobs pay their bills. This hybrid setup allowed them to experience and learn the intricacies of business before fully committing, reducing risk and uncertainty before the full-time transition. This approach supports Block and Landgraf's (2016b) concept of hybrid entrepreneurship and Chlosta et al.'s (2012) emphasis on proper planning and early entrepreneurial exposure before leaving a job permanently to fully engage in business.

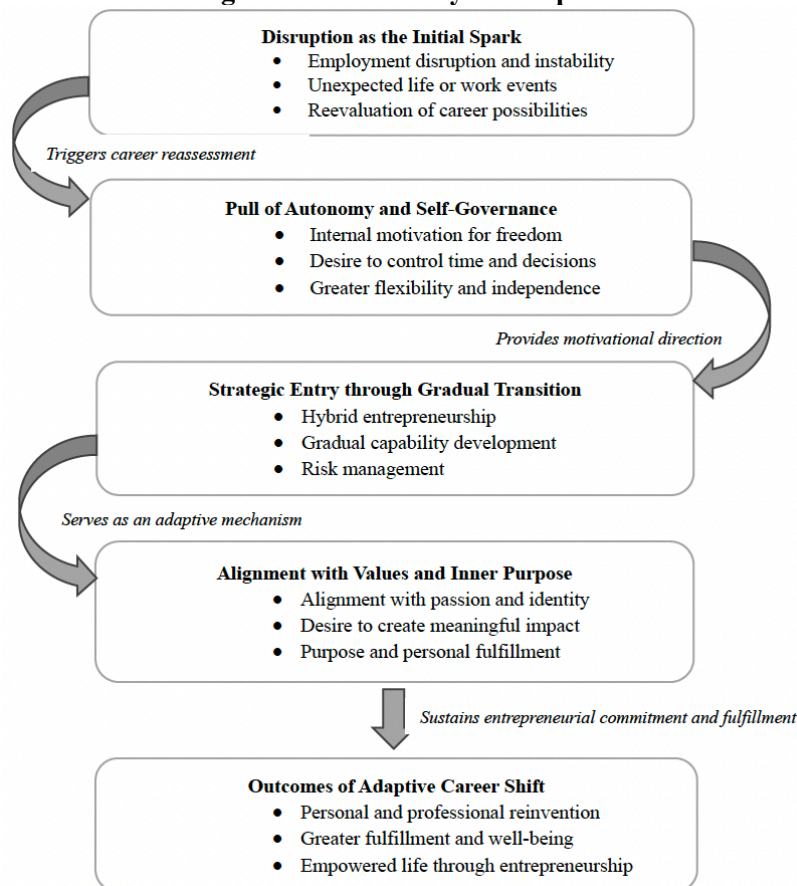
4. *Alignment with Values and Inner Purpose*

Once individuals begin their entrepreneurial journey, they often realize their business aligns with their identity, passion, and deeply held values. This contributes to a greater sense of fulfillment and purpose. At this point, entrepreneurship is not just a job but a calling—a meaningful endeavor that enhances personal and professional well-being, sense of purpose, and one's significance and contribution to society. This reflects the concept of purpose-driven entrepreneurship described by Shepherd and Patzelt (2018), and the importance of self-concept in business noted by Cardon et al. (2020).

Theoretical Integration of the Four Elements

As illustrated in Figure 2, the four elements of the Theory of Adaptive Career Shift represent interconnected processes that collectively explain how entrepreneurial transition unfolds. The theory suggests that external disruptions often create conditions that prompt individuals to reassess their existing career paths and future possibilities. As individuals reflect on these changing circumstances, a growing desire for autonomy and self-governance emerges, motivating them to seek greater control over their work and personal lives.

Figure 2
Schematic Diagram of the Theory of Adaptive Career Shift



Source: Own elaboration

Rather than immediately abandoning traditional employment, individuals often adopt gradual, strategic approaches that let them explore entrepreneurial opportunities while managing uncertainty and risk. Through this adaptive transition process, individuals increasingly align their entrepreneurial activities with their personal values, aspirations, and sense of purpose. In this process, disruption creates the need for reassessment, autonomy provides motivational direction, gradual transition serves as the adaptive mechanism for managing uncertainty, and value alignment reinforces long-term commitment to entrepreneurship. The interaction of these elements ultimately results in personal and professional reinvention, wherein entrepreneurship becomes not merely an alternative source of income but a meaningful expression of identity, purpose, and self-direction.

Theoretical Contribution and Positioning of the Theory of Adaptive Career Shift

The Theory of Adaptive Career Shift emerged from the lived experiences of individuals who transitioned from traditional employment to entrepreneurship. Although it shares ideas with existing career and entrepreneurship perspectives, it offers a distinct explanation of

entrepreneurial transition as an adaptive, evolving process. The theory brings together external disruption, the desire for autonomy, gradual entry into entrepreneurship, and alignment with personal values to explain how the transition may culminate in personal and professional reinvention.

The Theory of Planned Behavior explains entrepreneurial action mainly through intentions shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). This perspective remains useful in explaining planned entrepreneurial decisions. However, participants' experiences suggest that entrepreneurial transition is not always the outcome of a previously formed intention. It may also develop when unexpected work or life circumstances cause individuals to reassess their careers. Recent research likewise describes the movement from employment to entrepreneurship as a significant career transition involving barriers, adjustments, the use of career and social capital, and changes in career identity rather than a single decision to establish a business (de Klerk et al., 2025).

The findings also relate to the entrepreneurial identity perspective. Seibert et al. (2021) explained how entrepreneurial identity aspirations may interact with displacing work events in encouraging entrepreneurial entry. More recent longitudinal evidence indicates that entrepreneurial identity aspirations may persist over time and develop through entrepreneurial experiences (Belchior & Castro, 2023). Other recent research has shown that entrepreneurial identity is also shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which entrepreneurs construct and negotiate who they are (Ozasir et al., 2023). The Theory of Adaptive Career Shift extends this discussion by explaining how identity-related aspirations may become connected with disruption, autonomy seeking, gradual transition, and value alignment throughout the movement from employment to entrepreneurship.

The gradual pathway identified in the study is consistent with the hybrid entrepreneurship perspective. Existing research explains hybrid entrepreneurship as the simultaneous management of paid employment and entrepreneurial activity, which can reduce uncertainty while individuals test opportunities and prepare for full-time entrepreneurship (Raffiee & Feng, 2014; Block & Landgraf, 2016b; Ferreira, 2020).

Rugpath and Mamabolo (2022) further found that the hybrid phase serves as a learning ground in which entrepreneurs develop meaning, purpose, competencies, and self-leadership as they move toward full-time entrepreneurship. Their findings also recognize that this transition is not necessarily linear. The Theory of Adaptive Career Shift supports these insights but extends beyond the transition strategy itself by explaining how the gradual pathway interacts with external circumstances and deeper personal motivations.

From Employment to Entrepreneurship: Career Adaptation, Entrepreneurial Identity, and the Theory of Adaptive Career Shift

Recent scholarship further supports the view of entrepreneurial transition as a gradual and evolving process. Cestino et al. (2026), in their study of hybrid founder entrepreneurs, identified transition capacity as an important process through which individuals develop the knowledge, competencies, and self-efficacy needed to consider movement toward full-time entrepreneurship. This finding complements the present study's identification of gradual transition as a strategic mechanism for managing uncertainty before full entrepreneurial commitment. Similarly, Bousfiha and Berglund (2025) found that entrepreneurial identity may develop through repeated micro-transitions between professional roles, suggesting that entrepreneurial identity is shaped through ongoing experiences rather than a single decisive career change. These findings reinforce the present study's interpretation of entrepreneurial transition as an evolving process involving both behavioral movement and identity-related change.

The theory likewise relates to career adaptability, which concerns how individuals prepare for and respond to changing career conditions. Career adaptability perspectives emphasize the personal resources used to manage career tasks, transitions, and disruptions. Recent career research, however, cautions against viewing adaptability and resilience only as individual qualities because careers are also influenced by social, economic, political, and educational systems (McMahon & Abkhezr, 2025).

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The present theory reflects this interaction by recognizing that entrepreneurial transition is shaped by both personal agency and the conditions surrounding the individual. This is particularly important because the participants operated within a rural setting where networks, infrastructure, institutions, markets, and local economic resources may affect entrepreneurial opportunities. Recent rural entrepreneurship research similarly identifies both actor-related and environmental components as important parts of rural entrepreneurial ecosystems (Asmit et al., 2024).

Recent evidence from a low-income context further indicates that economic insecurity can shape engagement in hybrid entrepreneurship, with side-hustle activity functioning as a potential means of buffering economic vulnerability (Shahriar et al., 2026). This finding complements the present study's observation that employment instability and changing economic circumstances can influence how individuals navigate entrepreneurial transition.

The findings also resonate with broader career transition perspectives such as Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2013), which views careers as actively constructed through meaning-making and adaptation, and Protean Career Theory (Hall, 2004), which emphasizes self-directed and values-driven career choices. The participants' experiences reflected elements of both perspectives, particularly in their efforts to redefine career success according to personal values and life goals. However, the Theory of Adaptive Career Shift

extends these perspectives by explaining how entrepreneurial transition may emerge from the interaction of external disruption, adaptive responses, and entrepreneurial engagement.

The Theory of Adaptive Career Shift, therefore, does not seek to replace existing perspectives. Instead, it complements and extends them by providing a process-oriented explanation that connects circumstances, motivations, transition strategies, and personal meaning. Recent scholarship has also described entrepreneurship as potentially involving career, personal, and existential transformation rather than only business formation (Oluwafemi & Duff, 2024).

Table 4
Comparison of the Theory of Adaptive Career Shift with Selected Theories and Perspectives Related to Entrepreneurial Transition

Theory or perspective	Primary focus	Explanation of entrepreneurial transition	Distinct contribution of the Theory of Adaptive Career Shift
Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991)	Intentions shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control	Individuals pursue entrepreneurship when they develop the intention and perceive the behavior as desirable and feasible.	Explains how entrepreneurial transition may arise from the interaction of external circumstances and internal motivations, even when entrepreneurship was not originally intended as an immediate career choice.
Entrepreneurial Identity Perspective (Seibert et al., 2021; Belchior & Castro-Silva, 2023)	Entrepreneurial identity aspirations, self-concept, and entrepreneurial experience	Individuals may move toward entrepreneurship when the entrepreneurial role becomes consistent with who they wish to become; identity may also develop through experience.	Connects identity and value alignment with disruptive experiences, autonomy seeking, adaptive decision-making, and the transition from employment to full-time entrepreneurship.
Hybrid Entrepreneurship Perspective (Raffiee & Feng, 2014; Block & Landgraf, 2016b; Ferreira, 2020; Rugpath & Mamabolo, 2022)	Simultaneous engagement in employment and entrepreneurial activity	Individuals retain paid employment while testing the business, developing competencies, learning, and reducing the risks of full-time entry.	Explains gradual transition as one element within a broader adaptive process shaped by disruption, autonomy, changing priorities, and alignment with values and purpose.
Career Adaptability Perspective (Savickas, 2013; McMahon & Abkhezr, 2025)	Resources and responses used to manage career change, uncertainty, and career-related tasks	Individuals adjust goals, strategies, and behavior to respond to changing work and career conditions.	Shows how adaptive responses to career disruption may develop into entrepreneurial transition through autonomy seeking, strategic experimentation, and value-driven commitment.
Theory of Adaptive Career Shift (present study)	Entrepreneurial transition as a nonlinear and contextually influenced adaptive process	Transition develops through the interaction of external disruption and internal drive, expressed through autonomy seeking, gradual or strategic entry, and alignment with values and purpose, culminating in personal and professional reinvention.	Integrates environmental, psychological, strategic, and meaning-related dimensions into a unified, process-oriented explanation grounded in participants' lived experiences.

Source: Own elaboration.

Recent research on entrepreneurial identity and professional transitions likewise emphasizes that entrepreneurial identity may evolve through repeated role transitions and practical experiences rather than through a single career decision (Bousfiha & Berglund, 2025), further supporting the process-oriented character of the Theory of Adaptive Career Shift. Nevertheless, because the theory was developed from a specific rural Philippine context, it should be viewed as a contextually grounded theoretical explanation whose relevance and transferability require further examination in other geographical, cultural, and economic settings (Table 4).

CONCLUSION

138 Drawing on the lived experiences of individuals who transitioned from traditional employment to entrepreneurship, this study suggests that entrepreneurial transition is a dynamic and adaptive process shaped by the interaction of external circumstances and internal motivations. The Theory of Adaptive Career Shift explains how disruption, autonomy seeking, gradual transition strategies, and alignment with personal values may collectively influence the movement from employment to entrepreneurship. The findings further suggest that entrepreneurial transition extends beyond occupational change and may involve broader processes of personal and professional reinvention. By providing a contextually grounded explanation of entrepreneurial transition, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on entrepreneurship, career development, and career change.

Practical Implications

The findings may provide insights for entrepreneurship educators, career counselors, and entrepreneurship support institutions seeking to better understand the experiences associated with entrepreneurial transition. The participants' narratives suggest that entrepreneurship may serve as a meaningful career pathway for individuals seeking greater autonomy, flexibility, and alignment with personal goals and values.

The study also highlights the potential relevance of gradual or hybrid transition strategies, wherein individuals explore entrepreneurial opportunities while maintaining employment. In contexts similar to those represented in this study, these insights may inform entrepreneurship education, mentoring initiatives, and entrepreneurial support programs that help aspiring entrepreneurs navigate the uncertainties of career transition.

Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to the entrepreneurship and career transition literature by generating the Theory of Adaptive Career Shift, a process-oriented explanation of entrepreneurial

transition grounded in lived experience. Rather than viewing entrepreneurial transition solely as the outcome of intentions, identity aspirations, or strategic career decisions, the theory highlights how external disruptions, autonomy seeking, gradual transition strategies, and value alignment may interact throughout the transition process.

The theory does not seek to replace existing perspectives such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), entrepreneurial identity perspectives (Seibert et al., 2021), hybrid entrepreneurship perspectives (Raffiee & Feng, 2014; Block & Landgraf, 2016b; Ferreira, 2020), or career adaptability perspectives (Savickas, 2013). Instead, it complements these perspectives by providing a contextually grounded, process-oriented explanation of how entrepreneurial transition may unfold within individuals' lived experiences. The theory therefore offers a foundation for future research seeking to further examine, refine, or extend understanding of entrepreneurial transition across different contexts.

Limitations and directions for future research

The findings of this study should be interpreted within the context in which they were generated. Participants were drawn from a specific rural setting in Southern Leyte, Philippines, and their experiences were shaped by the social, economic, cultural, and institutional conditions present in that environment. Consequently, the Theory of Adaptive Career Shift should be viewed as a contextually grounded theoretical interpretation derived from participants' lived experiences.

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While the theory provides insights into how entrepreneurial transition may unfold through the interaction of disruption, autonomy seeking, gradual transition, and value alignment, other factors not extensively explored in this study may likewise influence entrepreneurial transition. These may include industry characteristics, access to capital, government support mechanisms, entrepreneurial ecosystems, educational background, family dynamics, and broader economic conditions. Future studies may therefore examine how these factors interact with the processes identified in the present study.

Furthermore, the study focused on individuals who successfully transitioned from employment to entrepreneurship. Future research may explore the experiences of individuals who attempted but did not complete the transition, those who returned to employment after entrepreneurial engagement, or entrepreneurs operating in different geographical, cultural, and economic contexts. Such investigations may help refine, extend, or challenge the Theory of Adaptive Career Shift and contribute to a broader understanding of entrepreneurial transition.

Consistent with the principles of qualitative inquiry, the purpose of the study was not statistical generalization but the development of theoretical insights grounded in lived

experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Future qualitative and quantitative studies may further examine the theory's transferability and applicability across diverse contexts and populations.

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