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Empowering Futures Through Hybrid Careers: An Innovative Community-Centric Learning Architecture

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Abstract

Technological disruption, extended working lives, and the rapid growth of non-standard employment are eroding front-loaded education models and intensifying the need for continuous, work-based learning. Within this context, polytechnic institutions face growing pressure to prepare learners for careers characterized by volatility, hybridity, and ongoing adaptation. This study examines the hybrid career, an intentional combination of traditional employment and independent contracting, as a vehicle for work-based continuous learning (WBCL) and career adaptability.

Guided by two research questions, the study asks: (1) how hybrid careers can be intentionally structured to maximize continuous learning, and (2) what competencies are required to sustain such pathways. Using a phenomenological research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 professionals in the Canadian creative industries, including hybrid workers, employers of hybrid professionals, and long-term independent contractors. Data were analyzed through a six-stage phenomenological process, yielding five composite themes with high inter-coder reliability.

The findings show that hybrid careers function as self-reinforcing learning systems when deliberately designed. Maximizing learning requires: (a) cultivating a multi-functional relational scaffold of mentors, peers, advocates, and clients; (b) engaging in disciplined, self-directed learning routines; and (c) strategically navigating the specialist–generalist tension. Sustaining hybrid careers further depends on a distinct competency portfolio encompassing entrepreneurial and financial literacy, client management, and the psychological capacity for identity adaptation and resilience.

The study concludes that hybrid careers are not merely precarious arrangements but represent robust models for cultivating adaptive capacity in volatile labour markets. The findings offer actionable implications for polytechnic institutions, highlighting opportunities to design community-centric learning architectures

that integrate mentorship, peer communities, micro-credentials, and reimagined work-integrated learning to support lifelong employability.

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The Transformation of the Labour Market

The contemporary labour market is undergoing a profound structural transformation driven by technological disruption, demographic shifts, and the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Automation and artificial intelligence (AI) are reshaping occupations and industries, demanding new competencies while rendering others obsolete (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2019; Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2024). At the same time, increased life expectancy is extending careers and heightening the need for continuous learning models (Boissonneault et al., 2020; Scott, 2023). These forces are reshaping employment structures, skill requirements, and the mindsets needed to thrive as work and learning become increasingly intertwined (Deckha et al., 2025).

Organizations have responded by prioritizing flexibility and externalizing labour through independent contractors, freelancers, and platform work (Bidwell & Briscoe, 2009; Oschinski & Felder, 2023), allowing them to scale quickly and access specialized expertise (Prassl, 2018). In Canada, the number of independent contractors doubled from 1.2 million in 2016 to 2.7 million in 2023 (Statistics Canada, 2017; 2024), representing roughly 20% of the labour force (Doblin/Diversity Institute, 2020; Cross, 2025). Globally, 70% of executives report using independent contractors to navigate pandemic-era volatility, indicating this shift is enduring (McKinsey & Company, 2021).

This restructuring fractures traditional career pathways and demands a shift from career management to career adaptation (Finch & Levallet, 2020). To execute this shift, the World Economic Forum (2025) forecasts that 29% of workers will need significant upskilling, 19% will require redeployment, and 11% risk displacement within five years. Thriving in this environment requires pivoting across contexts and managing uncertainty through personality, cognitive resources, and adaptive skill portfolios (Savickas, 1997).

The emergence of the hybrid career, an intentional combination of traditional employment and independent contracting (Shevchuk et al., 2024), represents a key manifestation of contemporary career shifts. While often critiqued as precarious (Alberti et al., 2018), this model is, for many professionals, a deliberate strategy to secure greater autonomy, accelerate learning, and diversify their professional portfolios (Shevchuk et al., 2024). The hybrid career can be theoretically understood through a shared lens of the boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) and protean (Hall, 2004) career frameworks. The boundaryless career describes the external landscape of such a path, characterized by mobility across organizational, project, and network boundaries (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). The protean career, in contrast, serves as the internal compass guiding this journey, driven by personal values and the pursuit of psychological success rather than external validation (Hall, 2004). Synthesized, the protean orientation provides the values-driven motivation and self-directed management necessary to effectively navigate the boundaryless professional terrain, enabling individuals to craft a coherent and personally defined career across multiple roles and organizational affiliations.

The emergence of the hybrid career carries significant implications for polytechnic institutions, whose mandates emphasize applied, career-focused learning. Recent polytechnic scholarship highlights the need to align assessment design and community-engaged learning with future-of-work skill demands (Deckha et al., 2025). Understanding hybrid careers as vehicles for continuous learning, and the conditions that maximize their potential, allows us to reframe them not as compromised arrangements but as dynamic, self-reinforcing models of learning that catalyze the acquisition, translation, and transformation of knowledge (Finch & Levallet, 2020). Two research questions guide this study:

- **Research Question 1 (RQ1):** How can hybrid careers be intentionally structured and navigated to maximize continuous learning?
- **Research Question 2 (RQ2):** What competencies are essential for professionals pursuing hybrid career pathways?

Consequently, this study focuses on student-centred integration of theory, practice, and industry partnerships

(De Courcy & Marsh, 2019). We begin by outlining the constructs of career adaptability and challenges posed by the legacy learning paradigm, then define work-based continuous learning (WBCL) as a mechanism for lifelong competence development. We then present our phenomenological study of 17 hybrid professionals and conclude with implications for practice.

Adaptive Capacity and WBCL

Understanding how individuals leverage hybrid careers for continuous learning requires unpacking conceptions of career adaptability (Hirschi et al., 2015). Career adaptability, readiness and resources for managing tasks, transitions, and disruptions provide a robust framework (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; Johnston, 2018). It is distinct from the personality trait of adaptivity (Hoffman et al., 2014) and from resilience. Instead, adaptability is a forward-looking, self-regulatory capacity that embraces uncertainty and reinvention (Rudolph et al., 2017). Hybrid careers inherently accelerate this process by embedding continuous cycles of adjustment and learning.

The dominant learning model present in a Western paradigm remains a 19th-century life-stage framework that front-loads education early in life (Robinson, 2015); however, rapid technological change and increased longevity challenge this assumption. Working lives now span almost 37 years in the EU (European Commission, 2024), while the half-life of professional skills in fast-moving sectors is 2–5 years (Tamayo et al., 2023). This misalignment necessitates a paradigm shift towards a continuous, open, and modular learning ecosystem that recognizes, facilitates, and validates learning throughout life, regardless of its formality or context (Robinson, 2015), and foregrounds whole-person, continuous and life-wide learning as a guiding principle for curriculum and institutional design (Cole & Coulson, 2022). See Table 1 for a comparison of the legacy and continuous learning models. Emerging frameworks for micro-credentials and short learning programmes provide concrete architectures for such modular ecosystems (Antonaci et al., 2021; Pizarro Milian, 2021). See Table 1.

Adult learning theory provides a foundational rationale for this shift toward integrated development. The principles of andragogy hold that adults are intrinsically self-directed, bring a wealth of experience to learning, and are most motivated when content is immediately relevant (Knowles, 1980). These learners typically possess advanced metacognitive skills (Flavell, 1979) and thrive in applied, collaborative settings, engaging most deeply when learning is aligned with their professional objectives (Rothes et al., 2017). WBCL operationalizes these drivers by anchoring development within the workflow itself. Rooted in Kolb's experiential learning theory, WBCL embeds continuous cycles of action, reflection, and experimentation directly into professional practice (Kolb, 1984; 2014). This approach not only enhances labour-market value through authentic tasks and participation in communities of practice (Billett, 2011; Eraut, 2004; OECD, 2025) but is also integral for hybrid professionals in sustaining their relevance and professional identity. Consequently, WBCL moves beyond a peripheral training activity to embody the whole-person, life-wide learning approaches increasingly called for in polytechnic education (Cole & Coulson, 2022).

Hybrid Careers as a Catalyst for WBCL

Hybrid careers cultivate a boundary-spanning mindset: the ability to traverse organizational, disciplinary, and cultural boundaries (Hsiao et al., 2012). Such boundaries create semantic and pragmatic barriers to knowledge sharing (Carlile, 2004). Boundary spanners translate knowledge across these divides and facilitate its application and co-creation (Carlile, 2004; Schotter et al., 2017).

This is especially vital for tacit knowledge, which is embedded in contexts and practices and cannot be codified easily (Nonaka, 1991). Tacit knowledge must be rediscovered within new environments (Tsoukas, 2009). Hybrid workers regularly navigate new clients, teams, and workflows, engaging in cycles of decoding culture, translating expertise, and integrating new insights.

This dynamic mirrors the construction of intellectual scaffolding, temporary structures enabling new knowledge integration and transfer (Lecusay et al., 2008; Roberts & Beamish, 2017). Repeated transitions compel hybrid workers to continually build and dismantle such scaffolds, strengthening their meta-competency of learning to learn. Hybrid careers, therefore, accelerate competency diversification, fostering opportunity recognition, client management, entrepreneurial problem-solving, and identity agility (Finch & Levallet, 2020; Hall, 2004).

Hybrid careers also present challenges. Without institutional

Table 1. A Paradigm Shift in Learning

Feature	Legacy Life-Stage Learning Model	Continuous Learning Model	Key Supporting Citations
Core Philosophy	Education is a front-loaded investment made early in life to be "spent" over a linear career.	Learning is a lifelong, ongoing process integrated with work and life, essential for continuous adaptation.	Robinson (2015); Finch et al. (2025); Cole & Coulson (2022)
Temporal Structure	Linear and sequential: Learn → Work → Retire. Concentrated in the first ~20 years of life.	Cyclical and integrated: continuous cycles of learning, unlearning, and relearning throughout one's lifespan and career.	Kolb (2014); World Economic Forum (2025)
Primary Goal	To prepare an individual with a stable stock of knowledge and skills for a predictable career path.	To build adaptive capacity, resilience, and the ability to pivot in response to a dynamic labour market.	Hirschi et al. (2015); Rudolph et al. (2017)
Locus of Control	Primarily institution-directed. The education system defines the curriculum and learning path.	Primarily self-directed. The individual proactively manages their own learning journey.	Knowles (1980); Merriam & Bierema (2014)
Primary Learning Context	Formal education institutions (schools, universities).	Diverse contexts: work (WBCL), online, community, peer networks, and formal micro-credentials.	Billett (2011); Eraut (2004); Antonaci et al. (2021)
View of Knowledge	Knowledge is relatively stable and durable. The half-life of skills is long.	Knowledge is dynamic and transient. The half-life of many skills is short and rapidly decaying.	Finch et al. (2025); World Economic Forum (2025)
Role of the Learner	Passive recipient of knowledge ("pedagogy").	Active, experience-driven participant in knowledge creation ("andragogy"/"heutagogy").	Knowles (1980); Kolb (1984)
Economic Assumption	A single initial stock of human capital is sufficient for a 30-40-year career.	Human capital must be continuously updated and diversified to maintain economic value and employability.	Acemoglu & Restrepo (2019); Deckha et al. (2025)
Response to Change	Reactive. The system is often slow to adapt to economic and technological shifts.	Proactive and agile. Learning is aligned with just-in-time skill acquisition and market trends.	Finch et al. (2025); McKinsey & Company (2021)
Underlying Career Model	Supports the "Organizational Career" – a linear path within one or a few companies.	Supports the "Protean/ Boundaryless Career" – a personal, flexible, and self-directed path across many roles and contexts.	Arthur & Rousseau (1996); Hall (2004)

support, individuals must create their own learning infrastructures, such as mentors, peer networks, and self-directed projects (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2019). Empowerment thus becomes foundational. Self-determination theory posits that autonomy fuels intrinsic motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000), while Bandura (1997) emphasizes self-efficacy as a driver of resilience. A lack of agency is linked to stress and disengagement (Blustein et al., 2016; Canadian Mental Health Association, 2023).

These dynamics underscore the need to understand hybrid careers as learning systems and identify the conditions that maximize their developmental potential. It is this intersection, between structure and adaptation, that our study investigates. This calls for a deeper understanding of the roles hybrid careers can play in continuous learning, including the conditions required to maximize learning potential. It is this intersection, where the structure of the hybrid career meets the processes of adaptation and learning, that our research aims to explore.

Methodology

Scope of Study

This study focuses on hybrid careers within the creative industries, a sector at the vanguard of labour market transformation due to its legacy of independent contractors and the emergence of artificial intelligence (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2024; Oakley & Ward, 2018). Global exports of creative services grew significantly to $1.4 trillion in 2022, a 29% rise from 2017, while creative goods exports increased by 19% to $713 billion (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2024). In Canada, the creative economy accounts for $53.1 billion in GDP, representing 2.7% of Canada's overall GDP and creating more than 66,500 direct jobs (excluding spin-off employment) (Department of Canadian Heritage, 2017; n.d.).

Reflecting broader trends, the creative sector has highly externalized its workforce, with contingent labour rates twice that of other sectors (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2019). This has reconfigured the profession into a fast-paced, data-intensive field requiring specialized competencies (Schlee & Karns, 2017). Success for these professionals now depends on building a diverse portfolio of experiences that demands adaptability, self-management, and strategic networking (Ashford et al., 2018). To investigate this, we conducted a phenomenological study based on 17 in-depth interviews with professionals engaged in hybrid labour. The sample was stratified according to three criteria (refer to Table 1):

- **Professional Experience:** The study recruited key informants from three professional cohorts. The first cohort comprises hybrid professionals (n = 10). The second cohort consists of employers of hybrid professionals (n = 4). The third cohort consists of professionals who have spent their entire careers as independent contractors (n = 3).
- **Career Stage:** Key informants were recruited from diverse career stages. The final sample includes key informants with 4 to 30 years of professional experience.
- **Gender:** The final sample included ten females and seven males.

The 17 key informant interviews, ranging from 60 to 90 minutes, were audio recorded using a semi-structured protocol (Kallio et al., 2016). Data were analyzed via a six-stage phenomenological process (Moustakas, 1994) to extract subjective interpretations. First, 2 researchers independently reviewed transcripts holistically. They then manually coded interviews, allowing themes to emerge without an a priori scheme, and extracted textual examples of informants' perceptions. Using horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994), the researchers independently consolidated themes across all interviews, noting their frequency and removing repetition.

This independent analysis initially yielded nine themes. The researchers then met and engaged in a staged reduction process to isolate five composite themes without compromising individual contributions. The 93% inter-coder reliability validated this coding (Belotto, 2018). Finally, the whole team defined the five composite themes, selected representative textual examples, and linked the findings back to the research questions.

Results

The results are organized into five composite themes that directly and sequentially address the research questions. The first three themes highlight the active, structural processes individuals employ to design their careers for learning (RQ1). The subsequent two themes detail the foundational competencies required to thrive as a hybrid professional (RQ2). Throughout, we illustrate how these elements intertwine

to position the hybrid career as a robust, self-reinforcing foundation for WBCL.

RQ 1: Designing a Hybrid Career for Continuous Learning

The results suggest that the learning potential of a hybrid career demands intentionality. Maximizing this potential requires individuals to structure their professional lives around three core, active processes:

Theme 1: Cultivating a Relational Scaffold

Our analysis reveals that the foundational structure of a successful hybrid career is not individual, but relational. The most robust finding was the critical role of a deliberately constructed professional network. This multi-functional scaffold, far surpassing traditional mentorship, forms the core architecture for a sustainable career. It operates as a distributed knowledge system, directly enabling continuous learning while also providing essential psychological support and professional opportunities.

Theme 1a: From a Mentor to an Ecosystem

While the importance of a mentor was a recurring theme, providing technical knowledge, psychosocial support, and career advocacy, the results reveal a more nuanced reality. Interviewees relied on a diverse ecosystem of relationships, each serving distinct purposes. This ecosystem incorporates three supports:

- **Advocates who proactively create opportunities:** As one participant noted: "whether it's... people that are going to advocate for you, on your behalf to get you to the different positions, like I've been fortunate to have different advocates and mentors throughout my career that have both encouraged me. This depicts a relationship that extends beyond advice-giving to active sponsorship.
- **Peer communities for mutual support and co-learning:** Participants described environments like co-working spaces where, as one designer shared, "you have all these designers who are technically competing against each other, supporting each other and learning and growing off of each other." These relationships are critical for real-time problem-solving and emotional solidarity.
- **Client and colleague networks that form a foundational web for future work:** A participant explained, "your first working gig will be for people that you've either worked for in the past or that know your work."This underscores how past professional relationships are converted into developmental and economic capital.

This ecosystem recognizes that social capital is a critical, accumulable endowment that is continuously invested in and drawn upon. Comparable symbiotic relationships between formal structured learning, WBCL, and mentorship have been documented in polytechnic contexts, where WBCL and peer networks jointly support student development (Ross & Callahan-Nasser, 2025).

Theme 1b: A Network as a Learning Asset

The network functions not as a static contact list but as a dynamic system for managing workflow and facilitating knowledge exchange. This network is the primary site for the transfer of tacit knowledge (Nonaka, 1991). The informal learning that occurs in these peer-to-peer interactions, sharing challenges, solutions, and industry insights, is a fundamental component of WBCL. It allows hybrid professionals to stay current with evolving practices and solve novel problems that are seldom addressed in formal education. As one participant emphasized, mentorship filled a critical gap, as "...you find a mentor, and that is, that is kind of an aspect of education that I do not see as well as it is valued."

Theme 1c: Relationship Intentionality

The cultivation of this network is a disciplined practice, a direct adapting response in the career adaptability model (Johnston, 2018). Key Informant 11 explicitly described this as a conscious strategy:

> "[T]reating everyone I run into, whether it's someone I am working with, above me, someone I am working with below me, someone at my level, the client, an external vendor... I would treat everyone. For me, every person you run into is someone that you might want to help in the future or need help from."

This reframes networking from a peripheral social activity to a core strategic competency, relational orchestration, that is essential for both opportunity creation and distributed knowledge acquisition.

Theme 2: Self-Directed Learning as a Disciplined Practice

The data reveal that continuous learning in a hybrid career is not a passive byproduct of work but a proactive, disciplined practice. This self-directed learning serves as the foundation of an iterative process in which existing competencies (such as learning agility) are leveraged to acquire new competencies and experiences. Unlocking this potential requires intentionality, such as environmental scanning, curating diverse inputs, and continuous self-assessment. These disciplined habits transform the inherent variety of hybrid experiences into a scaffolded personal development curriculum.

Theme 2a: Agile Skill Acquisition

Hybrid professionals exhibit a constant, almost reflexive, habit of auditing the market and their own competencies. They identify emerging trends or competency gaps and immediately seek out paths to address them. This is characterized by an agile, just-in-time approach to learning. One participant exemplified this with their use of online micro-courses:

> "Yeah, it's an online school. And it's just basically almost like YouTube videos, followed by quizzes and questions and stuff like that... I am one of those people ...I'll buy it every time. I was like, this is awesome... And I am like, I am completely back up to speed."

Another participant described an "18-minute course with... one little quiz at the end" on a specific software update, which made him feel immediately up to date. These are examples of learning agility, a key competency resource that enables the rapid acquisition of new development resources.

Theme 2b: Diverse Learning Modalities

Learning is highly pragmatic and occurs through a curated portfolio of informal channels. This includes staying up to date on industry news and trends, attending conferences, and learning by doing and from others. One participant highlighted a strategic approach to leveraging her own business for upskilling: "I always hire people who are better than me, and then I can learn from them." This demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of leveraging one's work environment as a primary learning source.

Theme 2c: The Learning Imperative

Underpinning this activity is a disciplined commitment to learning. The pressure to maintain relevance was captured succinctly by one participant: "You have to kill it... you have to stay at that level." This goes beyond motivation; it reflects the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate one's own learning processes, a hallmark of effective adult learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The hybrid professional is not just learning new competencies; they are consciously developing their ability to learn, unlearn, and relearn, the core competency for sustained currency in a dynamic market.

Theme 3: Navigating the Specialist-Generalist Tension

The findings suggest that the "T-shaped" competency profile is not fixed but rather a dynamic balance that hybrid professionals constantly navigate. This tension between depth and breadth is a central site of learning, directly enabling the translation of knowledge across contexts (Carlile, 2004). In answer to RQ1, structuring a learning career requires agile movement along this depth-breadth continuum. The most potent learning occurs in the act of translation, applying deep expertise to novel problems or using broad understanding to isolate where specialist depth is needed. Thus, hybrid professionals must possess strategic flexibility.

Theme 3a: Market Pressure

Conversely, hybrid professionals often feel immense market pressure to generalize to maintain their value. As one participant stated explicitly, "You can't be a single offering entity... Unless you're able to touch on a lot of pieces for business... It's going to be more difficult." This reality can push hybrid professionals toward a broader, more generalist profile, requiring them to become a one-stop shop for their clients and thereby accelerating learning across multiple domains.

Theme 3b: Strategic Specialization for Market Positioning and Identity

The most successful interviewees demonstrated a conscious, strategic approach to this tension. Some employed a sequential strategy: be sharp and narrow (specialist) to get a foothold with a client, then expand services (generalist) once embedded. One participant used the metaphor of a "drywall screw" to describe this tactic. Others advocated for deep specialization as a long-term value proposition, advising

those who want to "practice their craft" to "go narrower, go deeper, and just keep doing that… worry about getting good enough and in demand enough that you can demand a higher price." This reflects a conscious adaptation to position one's unique value proposition strategically in the market.

RQ 2: The Competency Portfolio for a Hybrid Career

While themes 1 to 3 reflect on approaches to designing a hybrid career, themes 4 and 5 consider the portfolio of competencies essential to thrive as a hybrid professional.

Theme 4: The Foundational Competencies of Hybrid Professionals

To harness the learning potential of a hybrid career, professionals must master foundational competencies, including professional foresight, financial and business administration, client management, and negotiation acumen, as well as a robust personal and professional support system. These competencies provide the foundation to allow professionals to navigate seamlessly between full-time employment and independent contractor roles.

Theme 4a: Financial and Administrative Literacy

The findings demonstrate the operational challenges in their independent contractor role, including the stress of managing taxes, paying subcontractors and managing benefits. Moreover, several hybrid professionals described the challenge of securing a mortgage as independent contractors. One noted, "It's very hard to help her with the immigration, if I am self-employed, and also getting a mortgage was very difficult." This demonstrates that financial literacy extends beyond personal budgeting to navigating societal and financial systems designed for traditional employment.

Theme 4b: Entrepreneurial Acumen

Thriving in a hybrid model requires a range of business competencies often absent from traditional undergraduate education: business development, contracting, pricing, and client management. Participants described the critical need to manage client expectations and establish boundaries. One informant described the difficulty of managing client expectations and the need to "drill down" on clarity to avoid expensive revisions. Another emphasized, "You really have to be good with creating your work and life balance and boundaries." Furthermore, some key informants evolved from independent contractors to partnerships, recognizing the limitations of a non-scalable individual model. This represents an adapting response driven by strategic awareness of one's own business model.

Theme 4c: Personal Support System

The results highlight that the hybrid career is often sustained not just by individual effort but by a personal support system. Spousal support, whether financial (through stable benefits) or logistical (e.g., childcare), acts as a crucial risk-mitigation mechanism. As one participant shared, his decision was an "active decision" with his spouse to gain flexibility for their family. This positions the hybrid career, for some, as a viable household strategy rather than just an individual one, providing a safety net that enables bolder learning and career moves.

Theme 5: Adaptation as a Competency

A subtle theme that emerged was the ongoing psychological work of constructing a coherent professional identity outside traditional structures. This represents the subjective outcomes of career adaptation and identity coherence and serves as a crucial competency that enables the others. For RQ2, this identifies a key capacity: the narrative skill for identity negotiation. By actively building a stable and positive professional self-concept, hybrid professionals mitigate the risks of isolation and fragmentation, fostering the intrinsic motivation and resilience needed to fully engage in continuous learning.

Theme 5a: The Legitimacy Challenge

Key informants actively grappled with labels, seeking terminology that accurately reflected their value and professional status. One hybrid professional distinguished between her past as a freelancer and her current role as a "consultant," clarifying that "mostly what I am charging for is knowledge."Another made a philosophical distinction between an independent contractor (focused on being billable) and a solopreneur (focused on building something beyond themselves). This semantic work is a fundamental process of identity construction in a boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), allowing individuals to define their value proposition to themselves and the market.

Theme 5b: Constructing a Coherent, Purpose-Driven Narrative

Hybrid professionals consistently articulated a strong, values-based narrative for their career choice, which served as a psychological anchor against uncertainty and societal skepticism. This narrative emphasized autonomy, freedom, and purpose, core components of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). One key informant stated, "I personally like freedom. So freelancing is a lot more fun [and] flexible." In contrast, others framed their choice in terms of achieving a better "work-life balance." This narrative-building is an active process of creating meaning and defending against the pervasive narrative of hybrid work as precarious or less valid than traditional employment.

Theme 5c: Identity and Resilience

This ongoing identity work is a key mechanism for building the confidence (an adaptability resource) and resilience needed to persevere. It is the psychological counterpart to the strategic and operational competencies. By crafting a positive, agentic professional identity, individuals can reframe challenges as learning opportunities and periods of uncertainty as necessary phases in a self-authored journey. This meta-competency allows them to navigate the "protean" nature of their careers (Hall, 2004) and view themselves as the authors of their own professional lives, thereby directly mitigating the risks of isolation and psychological fragmentation.

Discussion

This phenomenological study reveals the hybrid career as a dynamic, agentically constructed engine for WBCL. Our findings, drawn from 17 creative professionals, identify five core interrelated themes that together form a systematic support for hybrid professionals. The relational scaffold supports identity work; operational resilience creates the cognitive space for deep learning; self-directed routines fuel strategic adaptation. Together, they demonstrate how the hybrid career actively operationalizes the theoretical construct of career adaptability.

Our findings provide a foundational concept: community and collaboration are essential to maintain professional currency in an increasingly dynamic labour market. Polytechnic institutions have already begun to operationalize this through academic models that integrate employability skills, work-integrated learning, applied research, and flexible delivery (Gustafson, 2019). Polytechnic institutions are uniquely positioned to architect the very ecosystems that blend education, industry, and community, making this demanding but potent career model sustainable and effective for the modern labour market.

The Relational Scaffold: A Community-Centric Learning Architecture

A central finding is that successful hybrid careers are built on a multi-functional relational scaffold, a deliberately constructed collaborative community network of mentors, advocates, peers, and clients. The participants' networks functioned as active agents in the transfer, translation, and transformation of knowledge, embodying the boundary-spanning role. This challenges the efficacy of formal structured education and presents a clear mandate for applied learning and industry engagement through polytechnics. Such relational architectures mirror emerging whole-person approaches in polytechnic education that seek to support learners' development across multiple life domains rather than solely in formal, structured settings (Cole & Coulson, 2022). Educational and industry engagement strategies stemming from this finding include:

- **Structured mentorship programs:** Formalizing connections between learners and hybrid industry professionals to provide strategic, experiential guidance, making this career path visible and navigable. This emphasis on mentors, peer communities, and client relationships echoes findings that WBCL and mentorship form a symbiotic triad in polytechnic education, enhancing both skill development and learner confidence (Ross & Callahan-Nasser, 2025).
- **Facilitated peer communities of practice:** Creating physical and digital spaces that mirror the co-working environments where professionals "support each other and learn and grow off of each other," fostering essential peer-to-peer learning. Designing these communities within polytechnics extends the traditional work–integrated learning and mentorship nexus identified in recent scholarship (Ross & Callahan-Nasser, 2025) into graduates' early career trajectories.
- **Industry-vetted project networks:** Developing formal partnerships with freelance platforms, professional collectives, and local businesses to

provide a steady stream of real-world projects, embedding learners in authentic professional networks from day one.

By acting as hubs that broker these essential relationships, polytechnics can further transform their curricula into living, connected learning communities, directly enhancing workforce readiness and adaptability.

Curricular Innovation for Self-Directed Learning and Agile Competency

The study reveals that continuous learning in a hybrid career is a disciplined practice of proactive skill auditing and agile skill acquisition. This self-directed learning engine is a core competency that polytechnics can instill through innovative pedagogical practices and curricular innovations. To foster this, we emphasize the importance of:

- **Integrating micro-credentialing and badging:** Embedding short, focused learning modules into programs to teach just-in-time learning and provide formal recognition for in-demand competencies. Emerging micro-credential frameworks provide concrete architectures for this shift (Antonaci et al., 2021; Pizarro Milian, 2021). This includes practices in Ontario and Europe (Antonaci et al., 2021; Pizarro Milian, 2021). Polytechnics can design stackable, verifiable learning pathways that map directly to the competency needs of hybrid professionals.
- **Fostering metacognitive awareness:** Using reflective portfolios and project debriefs to teach learners to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning processes.
- **Designing purpose-driven, client-based projects:** Increasing opportunities for learners to work on projects aligned with personal passions and real community or industry needs, mirroring the motivational dynamics of the hybrid economy. This is consistent with findings that underscore the role of assessment design and community-engaged projects in developing future-of-work skills within polytechnic settings (Deckha et al., 2025).

These strategies position the polytechnic as a continuous learning partner, equipping graduates with the mindset and methods to manage their own competency development, a cornerstone of lifelong employability.

Reimagining WBCL for the Hybrid Economy

A critical finding was the strategic navigation of the specialist-generalist tension, a process poorly served by traditional corporate internships. This points to a profound opportunity to innovate in industry engagement through WBCL.
These proposed models align with polytechnic academic frameworks that explicitly foreground WBCL and applied, community-based projects as core to program design (Gustafson, 2019). Models requiring deep cross-sector collaborations could include:

- **Placements with solopreneurs and micro-agencies:** Exposing learners to the 'suite of services' mindset and teaching essential business acumen.
- **Short-term, project-based contracts:** Moving beyond semester-long internships to teach the competency of rapid integration into new teams and contexts.
- **Cross-sector collaborative projects:** Designing experiences that span multiple community partners to cultivate the boundary-spanning abilities identified as essential.

Such models represent a practical methodological approach for creating the iterative cycles of experiential learning that directly build the adaptive capacities required by the modern labour market.

Supporting the Infrastructure for Lifelong Employability

Key challenges our participants faced (e.g. managing finances and navigating a lack of benefits) highlight a critical policy and governance gap. The support systems for traditional employment are misaligned with the realities of a contingent workforce. Polytechnics, as key stakeholders in regional economic development, are well-positioned to advocate for and co-create solutions. Implications for policy and sustaining employability include:

- **Developing bridge programs:** Offering continuing education on 'foundational competencies for operational resilience', such as financial literacy for the self-employed and contract law.
- **Partnering on social safety nets:** Collaborating with industry associations and government to explore portable benefits models for freelancers.

- **Informing labour market policy:** Using empirical data from graduate pathways to advise policymakers on the specific needs of the hybrid workforce.

By addressing these structural challenges, polytechnics can help mitigate the precarity of hybrid work, ensuring that their immense learning potential is accessible and sustainable.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that future-ready employability depends not only on technical skills but on the ability to learn and adapt within a collaborative community of practice. Hybrid careers offer a compelling blueprint for polytechnic education: a model grounded in external partnerships, flexible pathways, and continuous learning. By strengthening their roles as connectors and innovators, polytechnics can help learners build resilient, purpose-driven, and continuously evolving careers. Existing polytechnic models that embed employability skills and WBCL provide a strong foundation for this evolution (Gustafson, 2019). The opportunity is to move beyond preparing learners for single jobs and toward equipping them with the competencies to build entire careers.

The study's focus on creative professionals limits transferability, and future research should explore other sectors and longitudinal trajectories. Still, the implications are substantial: individuals gain a roadmap for designing learning-intensive careers; organizations learn how to support contingent talent; and educational institutions are reminded of the need to cultivate self-directed learners with strong networks and adaptive identities.

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