Career Development Experiences of Instructional Designers

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action regulation theory   career development experiences

instructional designer

The demand for online education has heightened the necessity for instructional designers who create learning experiences using learning principles, instructional theories, and technology. This study explores instructional designers' career development through Action Regulation Theory, focusing on self-regulation of behaviors to achieve career goals. Using a descriptive qualitative design with in-depth semi-structured interviews of instructional designers in higher education, six key themes were identified: accidental entry into the field, previous experiences, desired work environment, career success, networking, and learning resources. Findings highlight instructional designers' diverse career goals, including

leadership and skill development, with networking and institutional support crucial for career development.

Introduction

The interest and demand for online education, a popular instructional modality, has been growing. In particular, the recent worldwide pandemic due to COVID-19 has accelerated the surge in online education. U.S. higher education leaped almost entirely to fully online delivery of traditional face-to-face courses during the crisis (Ubell, 2020). Also, a substantial number of employee training programs and workshops in organizations have moved online due to remote work (Bennett & McWhorter, 2021; St. John, 2020). This surge in online education has also led to a growing demand for jobs such as instructional designer (ID), educational technologist, and e-learning specialist (Decherney & Levander, 2020).

An ID is one of the most critical professions in online learning. IDs design learning experiences tailored to target learners by developing instructional materials, learning activities, supporting resources, and assessments grounded in principles and theories of learning and instruction, as well as learning technologies. Also, they offer consulting services, emerging technologies training, and pedagogical support for stakeholders such as instructors and students (National Center for O*NET Development, 2023; Ritzhaupt et al., 2021; Smith & Ragan, 2005). There are a variety of educational contexts where IDs are employed, including higher education, business and industry, healthcare, government, and non-profit organizations (Wang et al., 2021; York & Ertmer, 2011).

The growing presence of IDs in higher education is supported by extensive literature, providing insights into their training, skills, and duties, reflecting a rising trend in research over the years (Pollard & Kumar, 2022). Most studies have focused on examining the competencies, skills, and knowledge of IDs (Bennett & Albrecht, 2021; Hart, 2020; Intentional Futures, 2016; Klein & Kelly, 2018; Kumar & Ritzhaupt, 2017; Pollard & Kumar, 2022; Ritzhaupt et al., 2021; Sugar et al., 2011; Surrency et al., 2019; Wang et al 2021), as well as investigating conflicts and interactions with stakeholders such as faculty and staff (Mueller et al., 2022; Richardson et al., 2019; Watson-Held et al., 2024). However, an analysis of their career development and management is scant in the current ID literature. As IDs become integral to higher education institutions, there is a pressing need for research on their career development and the support required for their careers (Pollard & Kumar, 2022; Mancilla & Frey, 2020). The evolving landscape of higher education, driven by technological innovations and global events, requires IDs to actively manage their careers, continually develop their skills and competencies with new learning technologies and design processes, and leverage their flexibility and expertise to help institutions adapt to new educational paradigms.

A career is generally described as an ongoing journey of work-related activities throughout one's life (Hall, 2002). Career development, an ongoing series of stages characterized by unique concerns, themes, and tasks, is important regardless of one's job (Greenhaus et al., 2019). Traditionally, the agent of career development was viewed as organizations. However, due to the changes in the labor market and business environment, the emphasis has changed to individuals' strong proactiveness and self-initiativeness in managing their careers. Career self-management emphasizes that individuals develop, implement, and evaluate career goals and strategies (Greenhaus et al., 2019). Action Regulation Theory (ART; Frese & Zapf, 1994; Zacher et al., 2016) focuses on the individual's self-regulation of their behaviors to achieve goals. ART proposes that individuals have personal goals and desires that motivate their actions and that situational and personal factors regulate them. Using the five components of an action regulation process, ART provides a framework for understanding how individuals strive to achieve their career goals and regulate their behavior in pursuing goals.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of IDs in higher education as they shape their career development. Using the action regulation phases of ART, this study examined the career development experiences of how IDs set career goals, gather information and resources, create plans according to goals, execute the plans, and process feedback. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do IDs start their work as IDs?
2. What are the career goals of IDs, and what plans do they develop to achieve those goals?
3. How do IDs execute the plans to achieve their career goals, and how do they process feedback?

Literature Review

This chapter explores three themes related to the purpose of this study: career development, ART, and the intersection of career development, ART, and instructional designers (IDs). The first section provides a brief introduction to career development. The second section discusses ART in detail. Finally, the chapter examines existing studies on IDs' career development within the theoretical framework of ART.

Career Development

Career development encompasses a set of activities through which individuals identify and pursue personal and professional goals, acquiring the necessary skills and experience to achieve these objectives. The traditional model of career development, characterized by promotion and stability within one's career, has been disrupted due to mass downsizing, loss of job security, and declining employer-employee loyalty, requiring employees to adopt broader career perspectives and remain flexible amid business uncertainties (Rodrigues et al., 2015). This shift has increased the need for individuals to proactively manage their careers taking personal initiative and developing career competencies to navigate their unpredictable and often chaotic career paths. The significance of career self-management has increased in recent years because of the evolving labor market, organizational

restructuring, and shifts in individuals' perspective (Hall et al., 2018). Theoretical frameworks that focus on the process of career self-management include the social cognitive model of career self-management (Lent & Brown, 2013), the career management models (Greenhaus et al., 2019; King, 2004), and action regulation theory (Frese & Zapf, 1994).

Action Regulation Theory

ART, a meta-theory, offers a framework for comprehending individuals' goal-oriented behavior, including its predictors, and outcomes, within workplace and organizational settings (Zacher et al., 2016; Zacher & Frese, 2018). Developed in response to behaviorist theories that conceptualized human behavior as mere reactions to environmental stimuli, ART emphasizes the regulatory role of cognition between environmental input and behavior. Unlike information-processing theories, it is linked to work environments and outcomes, recognizing the significance of the external environment in shaping behavior and actions, and emphasizing the importance of achieving concrete outcomes through actions. It posits that humans approximate their conception of reality through interactions with reality, seeing them as active agents whose actions emerge, interact with, and change reality (Frese & Zapf, 1994; Zacher & Frese, 2018).

ART proposes interactions and dynamics across its key components: goals, orientation, plans, actions, outcomes, and feedback evaluation. Plans are instrumental in attaining goals, transforming general purposes into specific implementation intentions, leading to goal-directed behaviors. Feedback, interpreted as information about the consequences of actions, provides individuals with insights into their current performance or progress toward goal achievement. This feedback enables learning which types of plans can be most successfully used in the future. When actions are successful, goals are achieved, and positive feedback is received, leading to increased positive effects (Raabe et al., 2007).

The five core components of the action regulation process include (a) goal development and selection, (b) orientation or mapping of the environment, (c) plan development and appointment, (d) monitoring or execution, and (e) feedback processing (Frese, 2009). Individuals are not required to rigidly adhere to this idealized order; human action can be somewhat chaotic, sometimes necessitating back-and-forth movement between phases or omitting phases in the action sequence. In this process, goals are mental representations of preferred future conditions that direct goal pursuit and indicate goal achievement (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). Actions describe goal-directed behaviors shaped by stable and dynamic personal factors and signals and feedback from the physical and social environment (Hacker, 1985). These actions, in turn, result in changes in the person and the environment. The stages of action regulation might need to be repeated, and when multiple goals are involved, certain action stages could overlap (Frese & Zapf, 1994).

Career Development, Action Regulation Theory, and Instructional Designers

Traditional career development theories emphasize individual traits, such as Super's (1990) life span and space approach and Holland's (1959) focus on job fit based on individual characteristics. However, they address neither the cognitive and behavioral processes

involved in self-directed career development, nor the interaction of career goals with other life roles. The protean career model (Hall et al., 2018) recognizes a holistic approach but does not explain simultaneous career goal management. ART, however, suggests that individuals can regulate their career development by proactively setting and pursuing career goals. Empirical studies (e.g. Raabe et al., 2007) have shown that a career management intervention based on ART can significantly enhance self-knowledge, career goal commitment, and career plan quality, leading to improved career self-management behaviors and satisfaction as well as demonstrating employees' self-management of their careers within an organization and the importance of organizational support in facilitating this process.

Haenggli et al. (2021)'s longitudinal study on 600 employees supported the action regulation process of career self-management, showing that employees' goal attainment influences future goals and actions through these behaviors. Wilhelm and Hirschi (2019) further conceptualized career self-management as action regulation and resource management, involving goal setting, resource mapping, planning, monitoring, and feedback processing. Hirschi et al. (2019) applied ART to work-family balance, proposing a model where individuals use action strategies such as resource allocation and goal sequencing to jointly attain work and family goals. Hirschi et al. (2022) expanded on the previous research by presenting a framework detailing how role expectations, resources, and barriers dynamically affect one's career self-management and its outcomes, resonating with ART in goal development, planning, and strategy implementation.
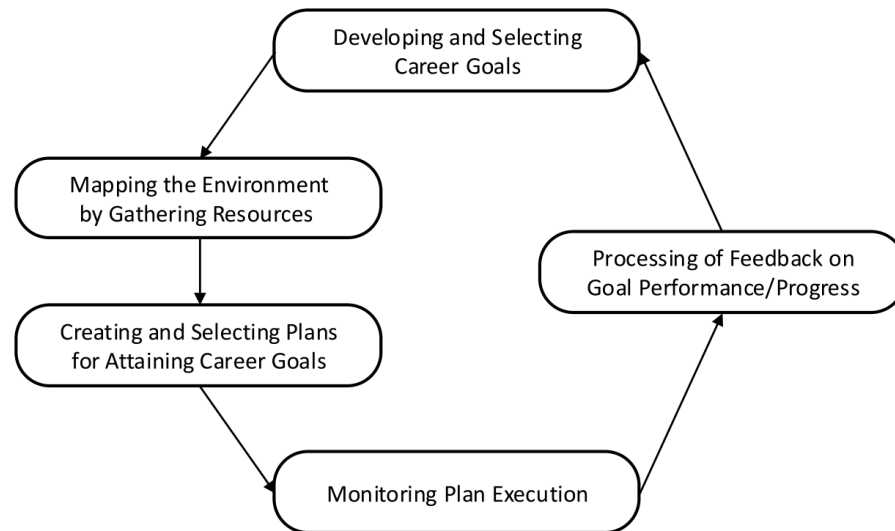
The literature on IDs highlights a need for more research on their career development. March et al. (2022) presented autoethnographic narratives of professionals who became IDs during the pandemic. Also, several studies present the competencies and skills required for IDs (Klein & Kelly, 2018; Larson & Lockee, 2004; 2009; North et al., 2021; Williams van Rooij, 2013) from the perspective of career development. Some research has categorized IDs into experts and novices based on experience, providing a foundation for career development studies (Best, 2020; Chartier, 2021; Chongwony et al., 2020; Sugar, 2014; Stefaniak, 2017). Compared to other academic roles, such as faculty and administrators, the career development of IDs is less defined (Mancilla & Frey, 2020; Tracey & Boling, 2014). Despite 70 years of history in instruction design (Reiser, 2001), ID lacks a clear and common career path (Pollard & Kumar, 2022). This study uses ART to examine the career development experiences of IDs from the beginning of their careers to the present, focusing on each stage of the action process.

Using ART, the proposed Action Process for Instructional Designers' Career Development includes five stages: (a) developing and selecting career goals, (b) mapping the environment by gathering resources and information, (c) developing and selecting plans for attaining career goals, (d) monitoring plan execution, and (e) processing feedback on goal performance and progress (See Figure 1). IDs set career-related goals, such as becoming an ID, pursuing promotions, transitioning to another organization or industry, or seeking professional development. Once a goal is established, they gather action-relevant information and resources, including opportunities, constraints, relevant tools, and methods, and signals that enable predictions about goal attainment. Using this information, they create and select plans to achieve their career goals. During execution, they respond flexibly to unexpected situations, adapt their goals and plans, and coordinate their actions efficiently,

considering the available time and other tasks. After receiving feedback on their goal performance and progress, they regulate their behavior to reduce discrepancies and achieve their goals.

Figure 1

The Action Process for Instructional Designers' Career Development

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                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │ Developing and       │
                    │ Selecting            │
                    │ Career Goals         │
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Developing and Selecting Career Goals

Mapping the Environment by Gathering Resources

Processing of Feedback on Goal Performance/Progress

Creating and Selecting Plans for Attaining Career Goals

Monitoring Plan Execution

Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design with in-depth interviews to explore the career development experiences of instructional designers (IDs) for the first time using the theoretical lens of ART. The research design aims to provide insights into how IDs understand and give meaning to their experiences and construct their realities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), thereby enhancing the current understanding of their career development processes. The novelty of this method lies in its ability to apply a new theoretical framework, ART, in the context of IDs' career development.

Participants and Data Collection

The participants include higher education IDs with five to ten years of experience. A minimum of five years is necessary to reflect on career development experiences and demonstrate commitment to the field, while those with over ten years of experience may find it challenging to recall early career stages. A novice is typically defined as having less than three years of experience, while expertise is characterized by at least ten years of hands-on experience (Perez & Emery, 1995; Perez et al., 1995).

Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the researchers' institution, the researchers recruited participants by (1) sending emails and announcements to various ID related units at a large mid-western university, and (2) posting announcements on ID groups in LinkedIn and Facebook to reach a broader audience. The researchers used a snowball sampling strategy to include only participants whose interests align with the study's purpose (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Following Guest et al. (2006)'s guideline suggesting at least six interviews being sufficient for qualitative research, this study conducted ten semi-structured interviews ranging from one to one and a half hours. Interview questions were developed based on ART to explore participants' career development experiences and were refined after a pilot study and expert review.

All ten interviewees were mid-career professionals with 5-10 years of experience in higher education institutions, primarily occupying middle management positions and reporting to higher-level supervisors. Most had changed jobs once or twice, remaining within higher education, with one transitioning from the corporate sector and another from an education agency serving all ages. The group displayed diverse and high academic achievement, with four holding doctoral degrees and six holding master's degrees in fields such as education, biology, mathematics, anthropology, and philosophy. Notably, three participants lacked formal instructional design training, entering the field through teaching or research assistant roles during graduate school. In contrast, the remaining seven had formal training through degree programs or certification courses in instructional design, highlighting varied pathways into the profession.

Table 1

Demographics

No.	Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Years of ID Experiences	Highest Academic Degree Received	Formal Training in ID
1	Alice	Female	6	Ph.D.	None
2	Beth	Female	6	Ph.D.	Master's
3	Clara	Female	5	Master's	None
4	Daniel	Male	7	Ph.D.	None
5	Emma	Female	8	Master's	Master's
6	Fiona	Female	6	Master's	Master's
7	George	Male	10	Master's	Bachelor's/Master's
8	Hazel	Female	8	Master's	Ph.D. (incomplete)

No.	Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Years of ID Experiences	Highest Academic Degree Received	Formal Training in ID
9	Isabella	Female	5	Master's	Master's
10	James	Male	8	Ph.D.	Certification

Data Analysis

Using Braun and Clarke (2006)'s six phases of thematic analysis, interview data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti. Data features were systematically coded across the dataset, collated under the theoretical framework and research questions. Thematic analysis resulted in 34 codes and six themes, and a thematic map was created for each stage of ART, as shown in Figure 2. Table 2 represents the strategies used in this study to ensure the rigor and trustworthiness on the four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Gibbs, 2007).

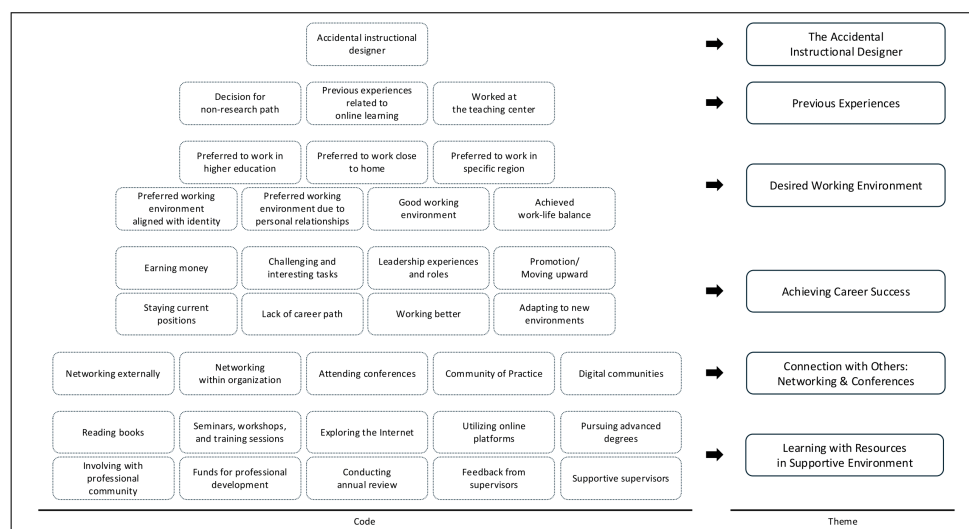**Figure 2**

Codes and Themes from Thematic Analysis

Table 2

Strategies Used for Trustworthiness and Rigorousness

Criteria	Description	Strategies
Credibility (Interval	The extent to which the findings match reality	Member checking, Researcher's positionality, Peer examination

| Criteria	Description	Strategies
Validity)		
Transferability (External Validity)	The extent to which the findings can be applied to other situations	Rich, thick, detailed description, Purposive sampling strategy
Dependability (Reliability)	The extent to which findings can be replicated	Researcher's positionality, Reflexive journal
Confirmability (Objectivity)	The extent to which the findings can be corroborated by other researchers	Reflexive journal

Findings

Through the application of thematic analysis across six stages, six themes have been categorized according to each research question: starting work as an instructional designer (RQ1), developing career goals and plans (RQ2), and executing plans and processing feedback (RQ3). Those six themes include the followings: (1) the accidental instructional designer, (2) previous experiences, (3) desired working environment, (4) achieving career success, (5) connection with others, networking and conferences, and (6) learning with resources in a supportive environment (See Figure 3). The arrows in the middle symbolize the interplay between goals, planning, execution, and feedback, indicating that these elements impact each other. IDs have various goals related to career development, for which they set and execute plans to achieve them. Consistent with the ART, the process of executing these plans and receiving feedback often presents difficulties and challenges, leading to the adjustment of original goals or the formulation of new ones.

Figure 3

A Diagram of the Findings from Thematic Analysis
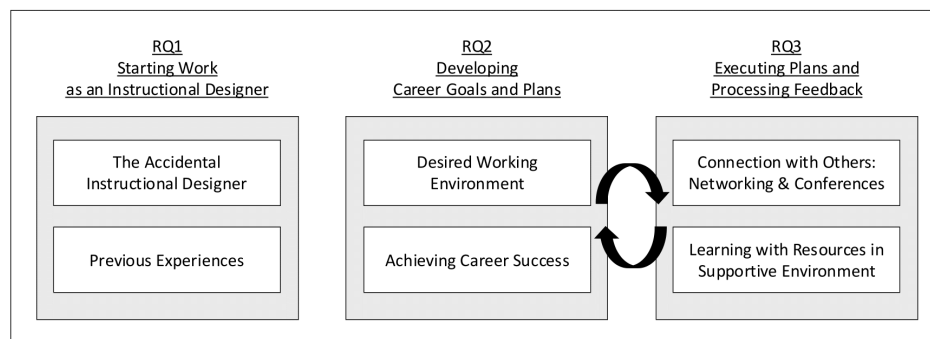
Starting Work as an Instructional Designer

Participants shared diverse narratives regarding the onset of their careers. As Emma highlighted, each participant presented a unique story about beginning their career in instructional design.

> It's a long story. … and if you've interviewed instructional designers, you've heard a hundred different stories. And I think, in the community, that's sort of the running joke: you can ask a hundred different instructional designers what their backstory is, and you'll get a hundred unique stories. (Emma)

Among these narratives, two prominent themes were identified: the accidental instructional designer and previous experiences.

The Accidental Instructional Designer

As with many professions, six participants found their way into the field of instructional design by chance, which marked the beginning of their careers as IDs. Isabella, for example, started her career after applying for an ID position unexpectedly. She described, "My first instructional design job landed on my lap in a newspaper. It was not a job that was published online anywhere. Honestly, I didn't even know that career existed until I saw the advertisement." Beth pursued a degree related to instructional design on her advisor's recommendation after not being accepted into her preferred major. Fiona's interest began serendipitously during graduate school when she took an extra course out of curiosity, with an instructor suggesting she consider a full degree in instructional technology. These stories highlight the role of chance and the unpredictable nature of career development in instructional design.

Previous Experiences

Four participants developed an interest in the instructional design field through their past experiences, leading them to embark on their ID careers. Specifically, a decision not to pursue a research path during their doctoral studies spurred an interest in teaching and related jobs. This interest facilitated their discovery of the instructional design field, for instance, through joining a team responsible for creating online courses, propelling them into a postdoctoral role as an ID. Moreover, three participants were introduced to the field while working in the teaching center at their universities. Clara worked at a teaching center as an undergraduate intern, reviewing and coding student feedback surveys for online classes. Observing little course improvement despite consistent feedback led them to discover the field of instructional design. These experiences highlight diverse pathways through which individuals come to engage with the instructional design profession, often driven by their educational backgrounds and professional aspirations.

Developing Career Goals and Plans

Desired Working Environment

At the beginning or during their professional journey, individuals articulated career goals that encompass distinct preferences for their work environments. Six participants expressed a preference for working in higher education rather than in corporate settings because of a

deep-seated passion for education, a desire to influence and engage with students, and a preference for the community and values inherent in higher education. Indeed, they are now working in higher education.

> I liked the philosophy of the greater good—right—of teaching to improve people's lives so they can improve their communities, so we can improve society. That's kind of my ethos, and I didn't see that fitting into a corporate environment well or being respected. And so, I decided to only look for positions in higher education or in other companies that were education focused. (Emma)

Among those who preferred working in higher education, personal reasons played a significant role. One individual sought work environment at institutions that resonated with their identity. Another participant desired a job close to home for a short commute. Two interviewees expressed a wish to return to their hometowns or alma mater. Personal relationships, such as those with a spouse or family, often influenced decisions to relocate. These reflections highlight the dynamic interaction between professional goals and personal considerations in shaping one's career trajectory.

Lastly, joining a specific organization or team has emerged as a career goal for these interviewees. Alice shared, "I was looking for a good team to belong to. I really enjoy working with other people. I enjoy collaborating with other people who are excited about the goals that we're working towards." Clara expressed a similar sentiment, focusing on the organizational environment:

> I was really interested in working with ABC because they are so well-supported when it comes to online education. They have a very large team and are on the cutting edge of that field, and I wanted to be a part of that. They're really leading the way in taking online education seriously and are adequately supported to do the job well. I also enjoy working with the colleagues over there, so that was a draw too.

These insights highlight the importance of organizational culture and team dynamics in shaping one's career goals and preferences.

Achieving Career Success

Another career goal identified by the participants was achieving career success, which includes the financial rewards, advancement in professional status, development of job skills, and adaptation to a new environment. Two participants highlighted that earning more money was a central objective in their career aspirations. They expressed that achieving higher income levels was not merely about financial gain but rather about securing a more stable and secure life for themselves and their families. Seven participants expressed a desire to engage with creative, challenging, and intriguing tasks. Among those tasks, managing and supervising people, making strategic decisions, and leading teams were frequently mentioned aspects of leadership experience and roles.

> One goal was to not build courses, but to be able to move past pure course building and do something more challenging and more interesting. … I wanted to gain different experiences like managing people. … do more higher-level things, higher-

level planning, quality control—not quality control, quality improvement, teaching improvement, those kinds of things. (Daniel)

Transitioning into more strategic and administrative roles through promotions was a goal for four participants. These IDs aimed to elevate their careers beyond traditional instructional design to roles that enable them to shape educational strategies and policies. They also sought changes in their job titles through promotions. One participant noted that a Ph.D. is necessary to secure back-end positions in higher education, underscoring a strategic approach to career development and acknowledging the importance of further education for attaining higher positions. These aspirations reflect a desire to influence the broader educational landscape and contribute to institutional development. Conversely, some individuals neither desired a management role nor aimed for promotions. They preferred stability, job satisfaction, and creative roles over climbing the managerial ladder. They focused on excelling in their current positions rather than advancing to additional responsibilities and pressures.

When discussing promotions or career paths, five interviewees highlighted the lack of a defined career trajectory for IDs within their organizations, pointing out the difficulties associated with promotions or changes in job titles. Hazel explicitly rejected the management role, preferring to stay on the creative side of instructional design. She expressed uncertainty about the career ladder beyond senior ID, highlighting a need for career pathways that don't lead to management. This dilemma was seen not only as a challenge within a specific organization, but also as a widespread issue in the instructional design field.

It wasn't like a formalized career at that point, at the very beginning. … There was no reference point as to where you start, where you go next; there was no typical progression. Everybody's story on how they got to their position was different. (Emma)

Professional skill development, such as improving communication skills, mastering new technologies, and enhancing project management abilities, emerged as a significant career goal among the participants, with many expressing a desire for excellence in their work. Emma shared, "I don't know if I had solid career goals other than just becoming more proficient." Isabella reflected, "It was difficult to know what kinds of goals I had for that position since my primary goal was not to look like a fool." James further highlighted his focus, "My career goals are really about wanting to as much as possible improve my ability to do this job." In addition, several interviewees identified specific areas within their work where they aspired to excel, such as Universal Design for Learning principles, Artificial Intelligence, program evaluation, and project management.

Adapting well to new environments during transitions has become one of the career goals of participants. Beth mentioned that adapting to a new environment during transitions can sometimes be a challenge; however, overcoming such challenges can also become a career goal. Clara underscored the challenges and opportunities associated with transitioning to a new working environment, such as adapting to a distinct team culture and shifting to remote work. She stressed her determination to quickly assimilate as much information as possible, aiming to swiftly become a supportive resource for her team. In a similar vein, George

emphasized the necessity of a steep learning curve in his new role, dedicating himself to learning from others and minimizing the time it takes to become fully effective.

Executing Plans and Processing Feedback

Connection with Others: Networking and Conferences

Interviewees gained numerous resources through connections with others in the process of executing plans to achieve their career goals. This primarily involved networking, which started within their own organizations and expanded to conferences and online platforms, developing in various ways. Eight participants identified networking as a key resource in their career development. Networking provided diverse opportunities in the workplace, enabling collaboration on new roles and projects, which could also lead to job transitions. In the context of higher education, IDs across various colleges or departments frequently forge connections and participate in networking activities with their peers. Such networking proves beneficial, especially when new job positions become available on campus, offering access to valuable insights and opportunities through the established network. While some networking happens naturally, four participants also emphasized the importance of making efforts to network actively.

Moreover, sharing information within this campus-specific network is often more efficient than other networking methods, thanks to the common ground and closer physical proximity of the individuals involved. Hazel emphasized the importance of Communities of Practice (CoPs), "it's important to join a community of practice of other IDs. We have a community of practice at the university with instructional positions from different departments, and then keeping abreast with current trends is vital." Additionally, there were instances where knowledge and resources were exchanged among colleagues within the team. The team prioritized cross-training and sharing experiences between junior and senior members, holding mini-workshops led by team members, and aiming to enhance the skills and knowledge of all members.

Attending conferences is a critical venue for connecting with others. Conferences are not only excellent for professional development—allowing participants to learn new skills and stay abreast of the latest trends—but also serve as an ideal platform for networking with a broad array of individuals from different regions. Another method of connecting with others entails acquiring knowledge, information, and feedback through listservs and online forums. Alice discussed her participation in EDUCAUSE listservs, where she can ask questions, receive responses, and share information. This interaction often leads to collaboration opportunities with peers who notice her contributions. She emphasized the importance of having a global community of IDs. Emma added that numerous professional communities and platforms like LinkedIn exist where new IDs can seek advice and feedback on various career paths, including higher education, consulting, and freelancing.

Learning with Resources in Supportive Environments

Executing plans to achieve goals involves learning with the utilization of resources such as reading books, subscribing to newsletters, job boards, and blogs, attending conferences, seminars, workshops, and training programs, searching the internet, and utilizing several platforms, such as YouTube, TED Talks, and LinkedIn Learning. Seven participants mentioned the importance of continuous learning, diverse resource utilization, and proactive engagement in professional development for IDs. One of the plans to achieve career goals involved pursuing advanced degrees, including PhD, EdD, and MBA programs. Although none of the participants were currently enrolled in graduate programs, they expressed a desire to pursue further education and obtain a degree in the future.

Interviewees aimed to achieve their career goals by tapping into a variety of resources. The support from their organizations and supervisors played a pivotal role in accessing the resources, such as books, webinars, and training courses. They reported feeling substantially supported when their organization allocated funds for professional development. Also, Daniel appreciated the flexibility in his work schedule to attend webinars or events. Not only funds but also the organization's system can support professional development. As an example, two interviewees discussed the importance of their annual plan for their professional development supported by their organizations, in continuously advancing their careers. Creating annual goals with supervisors at the start of the year helps IDs focus on growth and accomplishments, providing flexibility but keeping them aligned with the big picture.

Having supportive supervisors also emerged as a valuable resource in helping interviewees implement plans to achieve their career goals. Nine participants shared that supervisors provide important support, encouragement, open communication, and resources regarding professional development. Clara reflected, "They provided me with opportunities for growth and development, constructive feedback, and sent me to conferences. I really wouldn't have been able to move up into the full ID role without their support." Interviews revealed that a wide range of resources were utilized in the pursuit of career goals, with organizational support playing a significant role. This support was particularly evident when organizations offered professional development funds and a supportive management system. These insights underscore the positive impact of supportive and communicative leadership on employee confidence, professional development, and career development.

Discussion

The findings indicate that IDs have a wide range of career development goals. They not only devise plans to achieve these goals but also actively engage in implementing them. Moreover, through feedback from supervisors on their goals, plans, and implementation, they either modify existing goals or set new ones. This iterative career management process reflects the principles of ART, which advocates for dynamic interaction among its key components—goals, orientation, plans, actions, and feedback (Zacher & Frese, 2018; Zacher et al., 2016). Confirming previous literature (Haenggli et al., 2021; Hirschi et al., 2022), the findings of this study highlight that achieving goals impacts employees' future objectives and behaviors, attributed to the degree to which individuals participate in career self-management activities.

How do IDs start their work as IDs?

The findings of this study show varied paths to entering an ID career. While some individuals built on their prior experiences, IDs often began their careers accidentally, aligning with the Planned Happenstance Theory (Mitchell et al., 1999). This theory, significant in career decisions and development, suggests that serendipitous events and opportunities heavily influence an individual's career path. It emphasizes the importance of positively embracing and leveraging chance events and uncertainties throughout career decision-making and development. This theoretical perspective explains the initiation of careers in instructional design, demonstrating how unplanned opportunities and fortuitous circumstances have marked the beginning for many professionals in the field. This insight not only highlights the unpredictability and openness inherent in the career paths of IDs, but also stresses the importance of being open to and prepared for unexpected opportunities that can shape career trajectories.

What are the career goals of IDs, and what plans do they develop to achieve those goals?

ART emphasizes that challenges and difficulties during the execution of the plan and feedback stages are crucial for reevaluating and adjusting goals or creating new ones. IDs set and achieve goals influenced by the difficulties encountered in their work and the challenges presented by their environments. Participants joined workshops to enhance their project management skills while managing multiple projects simultaneously. Others, motivated by supervisor feedback, participated in training to develop their leadership skills. This discovery underscores the adaptable and responsive nature of career development among IDs, highlighting the importance of feedback and adaptability in shaping their professional paths.

To achieve career goals and regulate career management actions, networking emerges as the most critical factor for IDs. Numerous participants highlighted the importance of networking as pivotal in career development. Research shows that networking significantly impacts various aspects of career development, including career transitions and satisfaction (Franzen & Hangartner, 2006; Higgins, 2001). This underscores the importance of building and maintaining professional relationships for immediate opportunities and long-term career advancement and fulfillment. The emphasis on networking from the findings reinforces the notion that the connections IDs forge can be as influential as their skills and experiences in shaping their career development.

How do IDs execute the plans to achieve their career goals, and how do they process feedback?

While executing plans to achieve their goals, IDs consider CoPs as vital opportunities for professional development. CoPs serve as a fundamental ecosystem for career

advancement, offering a supportive network for learning, sharing, and growth (Wenger, 1998). They embody the principle that collective wisdom and collaboration often lead to greater professional achievements than individual efforts. Whether through acquiring new skills, expanding professional networks, or promoting collaborative innovation, the benefits of engaging with CoPs are significant and diverse (Schlager & Fusco, 2003). This underscores the essential role that such communities play in fostering career development, highlighting how involvement in these groups can substantially enhance an ID's professional development.

Leadership support and institutional resources are crucial for the career development of IDs, acting as a cornerstone for professional growth. Organizational support plays a pivotal role in career development (Barnett & Bradley, 2007; Werner & DeSimone, 2012). Raabe et al. (2007) demonstrated that organizational responsiveness significantly impacts employees' career satisfaction within the ART framework. IDs, tasked with the complex endeavor of creating effective educational experiences, greatly benefit from strong leadership and a nurturing organizational culture. This support is essential, as it not only creates an environment conducive to innovation and growth but also provides IDs with the necessary resources and guidance to overcome obstacles and capitalize on opportunities for professional growth. Through mentorship, professional development opportunities, and a commitment to a culture of ongoing learning, IDs can enhance their skills and advance in their careers. The reciprocal relationship between IDs and their organizations, fostered by dedicated leadership and comprehensive support, is key to achieving success on both a personal and organizational level.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This study identified limitations that might inform further research. The primary scope of this study is on individuals with mid-level career experience as IDs in U.S. higher education institutions. Given the inherent nature of qualitative research, consequently, the findings of study may not apply to other career stages or employment sectors, such as the corporate sector, as well as IDs outside of the U.S. context due to cultural and systemic differences in work conditions and workplace environments.

Moving forward, future research could diversify empirical exploration on the career development experiences of IDs by including individuals working outside of higher education institutions, particularly in corporate settings, and those with more than ten years of career experience. In addition, future research could explore various career-related variables of IDs. For example, the impact of formal training on career identity and career satisfaction could be compared using quantitative research methods, or adopting a mixed-methods approach to capture broader trends and patterns in career development. Lastly, there is a significant need for more longitudinal research to track individuals over time, providing invaluable insights into the evolution of ID careers, the impact of various life stages and external factors on career paths, and the long-term effects of career decisions and changes.

Conclusion

The reflection on this study's findings and the ensuing discussions offers valuable implications and recommendations for IDs and the field as a whole. Methodologically, this study represents the inaugural qualitative exploration grounded in ART, marking a significant shift from the previous literature that predominantly employed quantitative methodologies (Haenggli et al., 2021; Raabe et al., 2007) and focused on developing conceptual frameworks (Hirschi et al., 2019; 2022; Wilhelm & Hirschi, 2019). Additionally, this is the first effort to understand the career development processes of IDs based on a theoretical lens of career development. This approach enhances our understanding of the theoretical foundations of career development, providing the field with nuanced and valuable insights.

The insights obtained from the experiences and advice of current professionals present a significant, empirically based guide for individuals at various stages of their instructional design careers, offering inspiration and practical advice derived from real-life experiences. Furthermore, academic programs in higher education institutions can leverage the knowledge obtained from this research to enhance the design, curriculum, and instructional resources of programs geared toward IDs. It is crucial for curricula to integrate career development strategies and equip IDs with a solid base of skills and knowledge essential for effectively navigating their career trajectories and facilitating their exploration and progression through various leadership roles pertinent to their careers.

Lastly, the study highlights the need for a diverse career path for IDs, moving beyond the traditional linear model. Recognizing and facilitating such a range of career trajectories can lead to a more satisfied and dynamic workforce, ultimately driving innovation and excellence in the field of instructional design. Institutions and organizations should take these varied career paths into account when developing roles and creating growth opportunities for IDs.

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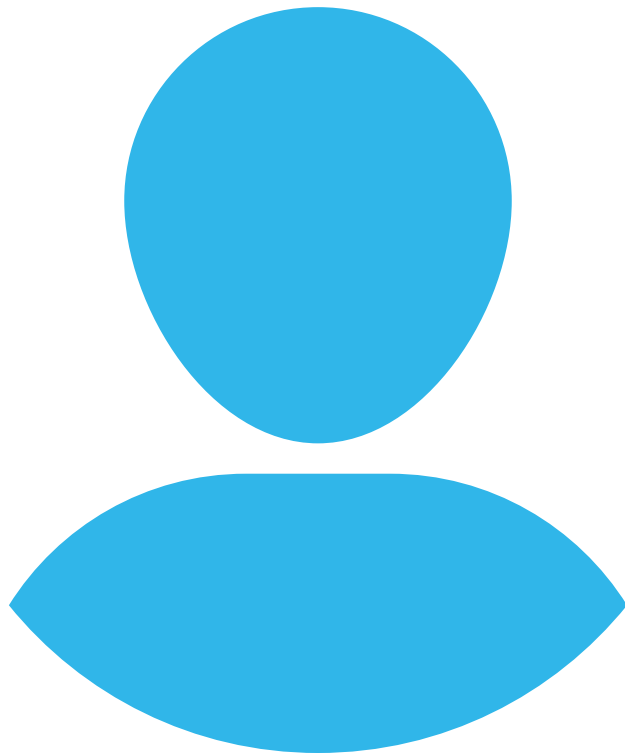
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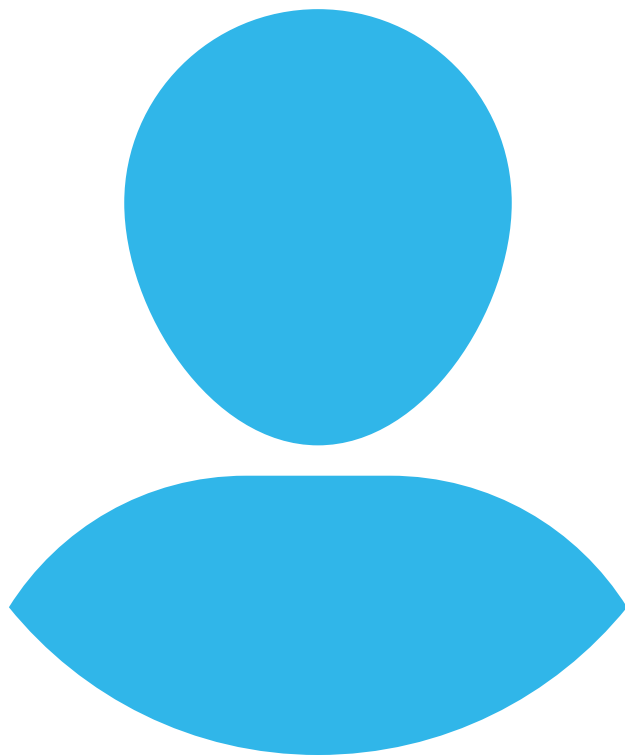
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