

Adaptive Performance in Early Career Transitions The Role of Learning Goal Orientation A Systematic Literature Review

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Keywords:	Abstract
Adaptive Performance; Learning Goal Orientation; Early Career Transition; Career Adaptability; Government Sector	Adaptive performance is a critical competency for employees navigating rapidly changing organizational environments; however, its theoretical foundations during early career transitions, particularly in government settings, remain underdeveloped. Following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, this systematic review aimed to identify, synthesize, and evaluate evidence on adaptive performance during early career transitions, with a focus on learning goal orientation as an antecedent, career adaptability as a mediating resource, and the contextual influences of identity threat and bureaucratic structures within the public sector. Searches of Scopus and Semantic Scholar using the search string ("Adaptive Performance" OR "Learning Goal Orientation") AND Career identified 209 records. After removing 50 duplicate records and screening 159 unique records, 42 studies were included in the final synthesis. Four thematic clusters emerged: (1) learning goal orientation as a dispositional antecedent of adaptability and performance; (2) career construction and self-concept mechanisms; (3) identity threat as a contextual moderator during early career entry; and (4) structural and cultural characteristics of government careers. Learning goal orientation consistently demonstrated a positive association with adaptive performance, primarily through the mediating role of career adaptability. Adaptive performance during early career transitions in government contexts is a dynamic, multidimensional outcome shaped by individual motivation, career construction processes, social support, and institutional constraints. Future research should prioritize longitudinal research designs, cross-cultural validation in emerging economies, and evidence-based interventions aimed at strengthening learning goal orientation.

INTRODUCTION

Adaptive performance has increasingly been recognized as a foundational competency in contemporary organizations, particularly as the pace of technological change, economic volatility, and structural reform accelerates across both private and public sector contexts. Defined as the ability to respond effectively to dynamic, novel, or disruptive work demands, adaptive performance encompasses multiple behavioral dimensions, including crisis response, uncertainty management, interpersonal flexibility, cultural adaptability, and the acquisition of new task-related technologies (Park & Park, 2019). Its relevance is particularly evident during early career transitions, when individuals must simultaneously master unfamiliar role expectations, develop a coherent professional identity, and demonstrate competence in environments that may differ substantially from their previous educational or training experiences (Tolentino et al., 2014; Guan et al., 2017).

Among the dispositional antecedents of adaptive behavior, learning goal orientation (LGO)—a motivational disposition characterized by the desire to achieve mastery, develop competence, and persist when facing challenges has emerged as a robust predictor. Individuals with high LGO tend to perceive novel or ambiguous work situations as opportunities for learning and development rather than threats to self-image. This orientation enables more flexible, exploratory, and resource-seeking behavioral strategies that are theoretically and empirically associated with adaptive performance outcomes (Mei et al., 2021). This relationship is further influenced by career adaptability, which refers to the readiness resources of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence that individuals mobilize when responding to career development tasks and vocational transitions (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

Despite this theoretical coherence, several critical gaps remain in the literature. First, the majority of empirical studies examining LGO and adaptive performance have been conducted in private sector, higher education, or laboratory settings, resulting in substantial underrepresentation of government sector contexts (Joo et al., 2013; Tabiu et al., 2020). Second, the mechanisms through which LGO translates into adaptive performance during early career transitions—particularly under conditions of identity threat arising from talent labeling and bureaucratic role ambiguity—remain insufficiently explored (Yuan et al., 2025; Guan et al., 2025). Third, no systematic review has yet synthesized existing theoretical and empirical evidence at the intersection of adaptive performance, LGO, career adaptability, and early career experiences within the government sector.

This systematic literature review addressed these gaps by: (1) identifying and synthesizing theoretical frameworks underlying adaptive performance during early career transitions; (2) evaluating the role of learning goal orientation as an antecedent of adaptive performance, particularly through career adaptability mechanisms; (3) examining the potential moderating roles of identity threat and social support in early career government contexts; and (4) developing an integrative theoretical framework and future research agenda. Guided by the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, this review analyzed 42 studies retrieved from Scopus and Semantic Scholar to develop a comprehensive theoretical understanding of adaptive performance during early government career transitions.

The urgency of addressing these research gaps is highlighted by several converging factors. Governments worldwide have implemented digital transformation initiatives that fundamentally restructure work processes and role expectations, creating increasing adaptive demands for newly recruited civil servants (OECD, 2023). In Indonesia, the implementation of the ASN Law (Undang-Undang Nomor 20 Tahun 2023) has introduced competency-based career development systems requiring civil servants to demonstrate continuous learning and adaptive capabilities from the early stages of their careers.

Furthermore, high turnover rates among early-career government employees—estimated at 15–20% within the first three years of service in several Southeast Asian countries—indicate that existing talent management approaches may be insufficient in supporting effective career transitions (Asian Development Bank, 2024). Without a comprehensive understanding of how motivational dispositions such as LGO influence adaptive performance during this critical period, government organizations risk losing valuable talent and experiencing increased recruitment and training costs. This systematic

review addressed this need by providing an evidence-based synthesis to inform policy and practice in government talent management.

The novelty of this systematic literature review lies in four distinctive contributions. First, this review is among the first to explicitly examine the LGO–adaptive performance relationship within the specific context of early-career government sector transitions, addressing an important gap identified in previous research (Asian Development Bank, 2024). Unlike previous reviews that have focused either on adaptive performance broadly (Pulakos et al., (2000) or LGO within private sector contexts, this review integrates both research streams with a specific focus on public sector career entry dynamics.

Second, this review introduces identity threat as a potential moderating construct that has received limited attention within the LGO–adaptive performance literature. By integrating perspectives from career construction theory (Savickas, (1997) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), this review proposes a theoretical perspective explaining how talent labeling, role ambiguity, and bureaucratic hierarchy may create identity-threatening conditions that influence the relationship between LGO and adaptive outcomes.

Third, this review presents an integrative theoretical framework that synthesizes four theoretical perspectives—Career Construction Theory, Goal Orientation Theory, the Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS) framework, and Social Cognitive Career Theory—into a coherent model of early career adaptation within government contexts. This integration addresses fragmentation in existing research and provides a foundation for future empirical investigations.

Fourth, this review generates specific and actionable future research directions tailored to the unique characteristics of government talent management programs, including longitudinal research designs and intervention evaluations. This practical orientation distinguishes the review from purely theoretical contributions and enhances its relevance for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

METHOD

Study Design

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The systematic review design was selected to synthesize existing theoretical and empirical evidence on adaptive performance during early career transitions, with a specific focus on learning goal orientation, career adaptability, identity threat, and government sector contexts. The PRISMA framework was applied to ensure transparency and methodological rigor throughout the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages.

Research Questions

The systematic search was guided by three interrelated research questions: (1) What theoretical frameworks underpin adaptive performance during early career transitions? (2) How does learning goal orientation function as an antecedent and moderator of adaptive performance, particularly in talent programs and contexts involving identity threat? (3) What distinctive features of the government sector shape early career adaptation dynamics and outcomes?

Search Strategy and Databases

A systematic electronic search was conducted across three databases. Two primary search rounds were executed in Scopus using the following Boolean strings: (1) "Adaptive performance" AND Career; and (2) "Learning Goal Orientation" AND Career. A supplementary search was conducted in Semantic Scholar using: ("Adaptive performance" OR "Learning Goal Orientation") AND Career. All searches were restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters published in English.

Screening and Selection Process

The screening and selection process followed four sequential stages consistent with PRISMA 2020 guidelines. In the Identification stage, 209 total records were retrieved (Scopus Search: 79; Semantic Scholar: n=130). After deduplication, 50 duplicate records were removed across databases, yielding 159 unique records for screening. In the Screening stage, titles and abstracts of all 159 records were reviewed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria; 72 records were excluded as off-topic, insufficiently related to the core constructs, or not addressing career or adaptive performance contexts. In the Eligibility stage, full texts of the remaining 87 records were retrieved and assessed; 45 were excluded due to: insufficient relevance to adaptive performance or LGO constructs (n=24), non-English full text (n=8), duplicate content under different titles (n=8), and full-text unavailability (n=5). In the Inclusion stage, 42 studies met all eligibility criteria and were included in the final synthesis. The selection process is summarised in Figure 1 (PRISMA flow diagram).

Quality Assessment

Given the heterogeneity of study designs — encompassing quantitative survey studies, longitudinal panel designs, qualitative interviews, and theoretical conceptual articles — a formal meta-analytic quality appraisal was not applied uniformly. Instead, a narrative quality assessment framework was employed, evaluating each study on four dimensions: (1) clarity and appropriateness of research design; (2) rigour and transparency of data collection and analysis; (3) relevance of constructs to the review questions; and (4) contribution to theoretical understanding of the adaptive performance–LGO nexus in career and government contexts. Studies were not excluded solely on quality grounds but were weighted accordingly in the narrative synthesis.

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data from included studies were extracted using a standardised template capturing: authors and year; study design and methodology; sample characteristics (population, sector, country); key constructs measured or theorised; main findings relevant to adaptive performance, LGO, career adaptability, identity threat, or government career dynamics; and theoretical frameworks employed. A narrative synthesis approach was adopted, organising findings thematically across the three review questions. Where empirical evidence was limited particularly for government sector contexts — theoretical propositions were developed by integrating findings from adjacent literatures with established career development frameworks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Study Selection Results

The initial database searches identified 209 total records across three databases. After removing 50 duplicate records, 159 unique records were screened. Following title/abstract screening, 87 records advanced to full-text review, from which 42 studies were ultimately included in the synthesis. The 42 included studies span publication years 2003 to 2026, with a notable increase in publications from 2019 onwards, reflecting growing scholarly attention to adaptive performance and LGO in career development contexts. Studies originated from diverse geographic contexts including South Korea, China, Australia, the United States, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Netherlands, providing an internationally representative evidence base. Quantitative survey designs were most prevalent ($n=28$), followed by longitudinal panel designs ($n=8$), qualitative or mixed-methods studies ($n=4$), and theoretical/conceptual studies ($n=2$).

Theoretical Frameworks Underpinning Adaptive Performance in Early Career Transitions Four theoretical frameworks consistently underpinned adaptive performance during early career transitions across the included literature.

Career Construction Theory (CCT) (Savickas, 1997, 2005) constituted the dominant theoretical lens in 18 of the 42 included studies. CCT posits that career adaptability — comprising the four C's of concern, control, curiosity, and confidence — mediates the relationship between dispositional traits and career-related outcomes. Multiple studies confirmed that LGO predicts career adaptability (Tolentino et al., 2014; Guan et al., 2017; Son, 2018; Mei et al., 2021; Cai et al., 2024), and that career adaptability in turn facilitates effective transitions, including school-to-work transitions that mirror early career entry into government. Son (2018) further demonstrated that self-reflection mediates the LGO–adaptability relationship, providing a mechanism through which motivational orientation is translated into adaptive resources.

Goal Orientation Theory (GOT) Dweck, (1986); Dweck & Leggett, (1988); VandeWalle, (1997); Button et al., (1996) provided the foundational motivational framework in 22 studies. GOT distinguishes between learning goal orientation (LGO; seeking mastery and competence development), performance-prove orientation (seeking favourable evaluations), and performance-avoid orientation (avoiding negative evaluations). LGO is consistently associated with more adaptive responses to challenge, greater persistence, and enhanced learning from feedback — all of which are directly relevant to early career adaptive demands. Joo et al. (2013) documented LGO's positive effect on career satisfaction and self-directed learning among Korean public sector employees, while Joo and Nam (2019) confirmed LGO's independent positive contribution to career satisfaction beyond transformational leadership in civil servant samples.

Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS) Framework Savickas & Porfeli, (2012) provided the primary operationalisation of career adaptability as a multidimensional resource construct. Tolentino et al. (2014) validated the psychometric properties of the CAAS in Australian university students and demonstrated its significant relationships with LGO and proactive personality. Khumhome and Tassawa (2024) extended this framework to Thai HR officers, finding that organisational career management influences career adaptability through

LGO as a mediating mechanism, with generational differences (Gen X versus Gen Y) moderating effect sizes.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) Lent et al., (1994) informed 8 studies, particularly those examining career self-efficacy as a mediating mechanism between LGO and career outcomes. Jiang (2021) demonstrated that career self-efficacy fully mediated the LGO–career interest relationship in a sample of full-time Chinese employees, while Lin (2026) found that problem-solving efficacy — a domain-specific self-efficacy construct — mediated the effects of LGO on job performance under conditions of knowledge-oriented leadership. These findings position LGO as a distal predictor of adaptive outcomes operating through efficacy mechanisms.

Learning Goal Orientation as an Antecedent of Adaptive Performance

Learning goal orientation emerged as the most consistently supported dispositional antecedent of both career adaptability and adaptive performance across the included literature. The mechanisms linking LGO to adaptive performance operate through several distinct pathways.

Direct Effect on Adaptive Performance. Studies examining the direct LGO–adaptive performance relationship found consistent positive associations. Mei et al. (2021) demonstrated in a three-wave longitudinal study of 204 Chinese PhD students that LGO predicted career adaptability through deliberate practice, with supervisor incompetence accusations moderating the relationship negatively. Shetty and Suprabha (2025) found that contextual factors including career adaptability and empowerment significantly predicted adaptive performance in Indian public sector banks (PSBs), with LGO as an underlying dispositional enabler. The Effects of Goal Orientation on Task, Contextual, and Adaptive Performance study (2014) provided direct evidence of LGO’s positive predictive relationship with all three performance dimensions across social work contexts.

Mediated Through Career Adaptability. The most robust evidence for LGO’s influence on adaptive outcomes operates through career adaptability as a mediating resource. Tolentino et al. (2014) confirmed that LGO predicts career adaptability resources (CAAS subscales), which in turn facilitate adaptive behaviours during career transitions. Guan et al. (2017) found in a two-wave study that LGO mediated the effects of openness to experience, conscientiousness, and approach traits on career adaptability. Cai et al. (2024) extended this model to working adults, finding that goal orientation predicted both career adaptability and thriving at work. Khumhome and Tassawa (2024) demonstrated that LGO fully mediated the organisational career management–adaptability relationship, confirming LGO as a critical transmission mechanism for institutional career investment.

Mediated Through Career Self-Efficacy. Jiang (2021) established that career self-efficacy mediated the LGO–career interest relationship, while also moderating the self-efficacy–career interest path. Fernando (2024) demonstrated that LGO mediated the psychological capital–performance goal orientation relationship among Generation Z employees in the Philippines, indicating that LGO functions as an internalised motivational bridge between personal resources and performance orientation. Miftah (2019) further confirmed that career adaptability mediated the LGO–self-perceived employability relationship in Indonesian university students, suggesting that LGO’s career outcome effects are particularly salient at the school-to-work transition stage.

Moderated by Social Support and Mentoring. Several studies identified social support as a critical boundary condition for LGO's adaptive effects. Son (2018) found that mentoring moderated the self-reflection–adaptability relationship, such that the benefits of reflective processing were amplified for individuals with access to mentors. Welsh and Wanberg (2009) demonstrated that LGO predicted greater mentoring receipt among new job market entrants, suggesting a reciprocal dynamic: LGO-oriented individuals actively seek social learning resources, which in turn enhance adaptive capacity. Park et al. (2024) documented that career calling influenced voice behaviours through LGO in hotel employees, with affect spin moderating this pathway — indicating that the LGO–adaptive outcome chain is sensitive to affective variability.

Identity Threat and Adaptive Performance in Early Career Government Contexts

A distinctive feature of early career entry into government talent programmes (such as CPNS or PPPK schemes in Indonesia) is the identity-threatening nature of the transition. Talent labelling, role ambiguity, bureaucratic hierarchy, and the gap between educational identity and professional role expectations create conditions of heightened identity threat that moderate the LGO–adaptive performance relationship.

Yuan et al. (2025) provided the most direct evidence for this dynamic, demonstrating in a three-wave survey of 495 employees that AI usage at work produced both thriving at work (facilitative pathway) and identity threat (inhibitory pathway), with LGO moderating these effects: employees high in LGO were better able to reframe technological disruption as mastery opportunities, thereby experiencing less identity threat and stronger career growth. This finding is directly applicable to early career government employees confronting digital transformation and role novelty simultaneously.

Guan et al. (2025) further demonstrated that adaptive career ecosystems reduce workplace stress for newcomers through social capital and institutional support structures, with career construction mechanisms providing cognitive and motivational buffers against identity-threatening demands. Noskeau et al. (2021) found that growth mindset (conceptually aligned with LGO) was negatively associated with impostor phenomenon via goal orientation, providing evidence that LGO-oriented individuals are more resilient to the self-doubt that commonly accompanies early career transitions. For government talent programme participants specifically, these dynamics suggest that LGO functions as an identity stabiliser, enabling individuals to maintain adaptive behavioural strategies even under conditions of role uncertainty and institutional evaluation.

Government Sector Contextual Factors and Their Implications

The included literature, while limited in direct government sector samples, collectively points to four contextual features that distinctively shape adaptive performance in early government careers.

Bureaucratic Structure and Role Rigidity. Joo et al. (2013) documented that public sector career satisfaction is strongly influenced by LGO, developmental needs awareness, and self-directed learning, suggesting that government employees high in LGO actively compensate for bureaucratic constraints by internalising learning as a career development resource. Tabiu et al. (2020) found that training, career planning, and job autonomy predicted adaptive performance among Nigerian local government employees, highlighting the

institutional enablement conditions necessary for LGO to translate into adaptive behaviour in public sector contexts.

Transformational Leadership as an Amplifier. Joo and Nam (2019) demonstrated that transformational leadership, LGO, and psychological empowerment jointly predicted career satisfaction among South Korean civil servants, with transformational leadership exhibiting the strongest direct effect. This finding suggests that LGO's adaptive effects in government contexts are contingent on leadership styles that create psychological safety and developmental opportunity structures — conditions not uniformly present in highly hierarchical bureaucratic environments.

Career Competency and Adaptive Performance in Public Sector. Lee et al. (2026) provided direct evidence from South Korean public sector employees, demonstrating that career competencies positively predicted career satisfaction, adaptive performance, and organisational commitment — with adaptive performance emerging as a key outcome rather than solely a predictor of further career success. Maravilla and Tuble (2025) confirmed in a Philippine national government agency that adaptive performance dimensions (task, contextual, adaptive) varied significantly by career stage and educational attainment, reinforcing the argument that early career status is a critical moderating variable.

Talent Management Practices. Dhanias et al. (2021) confirmed through a scoping review that personal growth initiative — a construct closely allied with LGO — is a significant predictor of positive workplace outcomes across Indonesian and global contexts. This finding has direct implications for government talent management: programs that cultivate LGO as a dispositional resource may generate superior adaptive performance outcomes compared to those focusing solely on technical competency development.

Characteristics of Included Studies

Table 3 presents a representative sample of the 42 included studies, organised by thematic contribution.

Table 1. Characteristics of Representative Included Studies (n = 10 of 42 total)

No	Author (Year)	Country	Key Constructs	Design	Key Finding
1	Mei et al. (2021)	China	LGO, career adaptability, deliberate practice	3-wave longitudinal (n=204)	LGO predicted career adaptability via deliberate practice; incompetence accusations moderated this pathway negatively
2	Tolentino et al. (2014)	Australia	LGO, career adaptability, proactive personality	Cross-sectional survey (n=555)	LGO, proactive personality, and career optimism significantly predicted CAAS scores; LGO emerged as a stable adaptivity resource
3	Guan et al. (2017)	China	Big-Five, LGO, CSE, career adaptability	2-wave longitudinal (n=206)	LGO mediated effects of openness and conscientiousness on career adaptability, accounting for 43% of variance
4	Joo et al.	South	LGO, self-	Cross-sectional	LGO and developmental needs

	(2013)	Korea	directed learning, career satisfaction (public sector)	SEM (n=291)	awareness explained 55% of variance in self-directed learning; LGO positively predicted career satisfaction in public sector
5	Yuan et al. (2025)	China	AI identity LGO, growth usage, threat, career	3-wave survey (n=495)	LGO moderated the identity threat pathway of AI usage on career growth; high LGO reframed disruption as mastery opportunity
6	Cai et al. (2024)	Singapore	LGO, career adaptability, thriving at work	Cross-sectional (n=232)	LGO predicted career adaptability and thriving; learning vitality mediated LGO–thriving relationship
7	Khumhome & Tassawa (2024)	Thailand	Org. career management, LGO, career adaptability, generational differences	Survey SEM (HR officers)	LGO fully mediated organisational management–adaptability career relationship; Gen Y showed stronger moderation effects
8	Son (2018)	South Korea	LGO, self-reflection, mentoring, career adaptability	2-wave survey (n=136)	Self-reflection mediated LGO–career adaptability; mentoring moderated reflection–adaptability link
9	Joo & Nam (2019)	South Korea	Transformational leadership, LGO, empowerment, career satisfaction (civil servants)	Cross-sectional SEM (n=303)	Transformational leadership and LGO independently predicted career satisfaction in government; empowerment mediated LGO effects
10	Tabiu et al. (2020)	Nigeria	Training, job autonomy, career planning, adaptive performance (local government)	Survey PLS-SEM (n=265)	Training, career planning, and job autonomy all positively predicted adaptive performance in local government employees

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review provided a comprehensive synthesis of evidence on adaptive performance, learning goal orientation, career adaptability, and identity threat within early career transition contexts, with specific attention to government sector dynamics. Drawing upon 42 included studies retrieved from Scopus and Semantic Scholar, the review demonstrated that learning goal orientation was a robust and theoretically supported antecedent of adaptive performance, operating primarily through career adaptability resources and career self-efficacy mechanisms.

The synthesis revealed four theoretically significant conclusions. First, learning goal orientation (LGO) consistently demonstrated a positive relationship with career adaptability across cross-sectional, longitudinal, and mixed-methods studies, with this relationship

influenced by mechanisms such as deliberate practice, self-reflection, and career self-efficacy. Second, identity threat conditions—commonly experienced during entry into government talent programs—appeared to moderate the relationship between LGO and adaptive performance, with individuals exhibiting higher LGO demonstrating greater adaptive resilience. Third, contextual factors within government sectors, including bureaucratic structures, transformational leadership, and institutional career support, functioned as important boundary conditions shaping the adaptive effects of LGO. Fourth, empirical research examining adaptive performance within government sector contexts remained limited, representing a significant gap requiring further investigation.

Future research should prioritize: (1) longitudinal research designs tracking adaptive performance trajectories throughout early career stages in government talent programs (e.g., Indonesian CPNS cohorts); (2) cross-cultural validation of the LGO–career adaptability–adaptive performance framework in public sector contexts within emerging economies; (3) experimental or quasi-experimental evaluations of LGO-focused interventions (e.g., growth mindset training and developmental feedback systems) in government settings; and (4) multilevel research integrating individual LGO, team learning climate, and organizational talent management practices as simultaneous predictors of adaptive performance outcomes.

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