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Shifting tides, stable grounds: balancing career mobility and stability through entrepreneurial competencies

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ABSTRACT
Entrepreneurial careers are frequently portrayed as highly mobile, yet this study reveals a complementary logic in which entrepreneurial competencies help individuals balance boundary-crossing mobility with periods of deliberate stability. Using interview data from graduates of a Scandinavian Venture Creation Program (VCP), the findings show how process-related decision-making and social competencies support adaptability and continuity across organizational and professional boundaries. While some graduates pursued high mobility, transitioning across industries and roles, most leveraged those competencies to deepen expertise within clearly defined boundaries. This study demonstrates that entrepreneurial competencies matter well beyond firm founding and extends knowledge of entrepreneurial careers in multiple organizational settings. By integrating boundaryless-career theory, entrepreneurial success involves both transcending boundaries and cultivating alignment inside them.

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Entrepreneurial careers; career mobility; entrepreneurial competencies; boundaryless career theory; Organizational boundaries; Professional boundaries

Introduction

In entrepreneurship literature, entrepreneurial careers are often labelled highly mobile, characterized by frequent boundary crossings (Burton, Sørensen, and Dobrev 2016; Mahieu, Melillo, and Thompson 2022; Marshall and Gigliotti 2020; Sørensen and Sharkey 2014). This mobility is typically operationalized as a move from employment to self-employment (Burton, Sørensen, and Dobrev 2016; de Bruin and Lewis 2004; Frederiksen, Wennberg, and Balachandran 2016; Koch, Park, and Zahra 2021; Thorgren and Williams 2023), including the boundaries one encounters during this transition (Hytti 2010; Marshall 2016; Terjesen and Sullivan 2011; Tran, Baruch, and Bui 2019). While such approaches provide valuable insights into patterns of transitions from employment to self-employment (Frederiksen, Wennberg, and Balachandran 2016; Koch, Park, and Zahra 2021; Sørensen and Sharkey 2014), they frequently overlook the broader and more nuanced processes of entrepreneurial career mobility (Burton, Sørensen, and Dobrev 2016).

Focusing solely on that one boundary shift overlooks wider forms of career mobility that unfold before, after and outside of moving into self-employment. Large-scale archival datasets privilege events such as firm founding and formation but fail to capture entrepreneurial competencies that are exercised within established organizations or across professions. An emergent stream therefore decouples the entrepreneur from the firm and positions entrepreneurial competencies as transferable resources (Aadland et al. 2024; Alsos et al. 2023; Jones et al. 2017; Killingberg, Kubberød, and Blenker 2021; Killingberg, Kubberød, and Pettersen 2023; Kozlinska, Rebmann, and Mets 2023).

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In this article, entrepreneurial careers are conceptualized as professional trajectories involving the identification and exploitation of new opportunities, regardless of organizational setting (Prince, Chapman, and Cassey 2021). For instance, intrapreneurial efforts involve navigating corporate environments to implement new business activities, while self-employed entrepreneurs perform similar tasks under different structural constraints (e.g. Alsos et al. 2023; K.-Y. Chan et al. 2017; Penaluna and Penaluna 2021).

In career research, competencies are framed as transferable and applicable across organizational and professional boundaries (Arthur 2014; DeFillippi and Arthur 1994). However, existing studies rarely explore the nature and extent of this mobility, particularly when entrepreneurial competencies are leveraged across organizational and professional boundaries (Alsos et al. 2023; Kozlinska, Rebmann, and Mets 2023; Penaluna and Penaluna 2021). To address this gap, this study investigates: *how entrepreneurial competencies enable individuals to navigate and evaluate career mobility within and across organizational and professional boundaries.*

Regional context: entrepreneurship in Scandinavia

This study is situated within Scandinavia and builds on interviews of graduates of a master's level Venture Creation Program (VCP) and their subsequent careers. Scandinavia's vocational landscape is characterized by a strong emphasis on innovation, collaboration, and sustainability, supported by comprehensive welfare systems and egalitarian values (Berggren and Olofsson 2021; Johannisson 2004; Neergaard and Thrane 2011). These features of the landscape influence both organizational structures and professional norms, shaping how entrepreneurial competencies are utilized. For instance, Scandinavian startups often benefit from public funding and a culture of trust, while corporate environments emphasize collaborative innovation (Gertler 2010). A regional context such as Scandinavia provides a rich backdrop for exploring how entrepreneurial competencies operate within and across organizational and professional boundaries. By embedding this study in a specific regional context, it recognizes how place-based factors shape career mobility and entrepreneurial activity.

This study examines the careers of VCP graduates who completed one of these master's programs between 1997 and 2007. The graduates were selected given their formal entrepreneurial training (Donnellon, Ollila, and Williams-Middleton 2014; Lackéus and Williams-Middleton 2015; Ollila and Williams-Middleton 2011), and their subsequent 15 to 25 years of career experience. These graduates provide a career perspective on how entrepreneurial competencies evolve and are utilized across diverse career contexts. The study focuses on two key aspects of career mobility: movements within boundaries, such as transitions between roles within the same professional or organizational context, and transitions across boundaries, such as shifts between industries or organizational types. By investigating these trajectories, this study aims to shed light on how entrepreneurial competencies enabled VCP graduates to navigate the complexities of modern career paths.

Theoretical framework

This study builds on boundaryless career theory, which posits that modern careers are increasingly independent of traditional organizational boundaries (Arthur 1994). Individuals navigate various roles, employers, and industries based on their personal and professional goals (Arthur 2014; Sullivan and Arthur 2006). Boundaryless career theory has been widely acknowledged as a valuable tool for understanding careers in an era where mobility and self-driven career trajectories dominate discussions (e.g. Sullivan and Baruch 2009). Despite its significance, a limited number of entrepreneurship studies have applied this perspective (e.g. K. Y. Chan et al. 2012; de Bruin and Lewis 2004; Dokko and Wu 2017; Hytti 2010; Marshall 2016).

Boundaryless career theory underscores the importance of enablers and barriers, conceptualized as boundaries, to career mobility (Sullivan and Arthur 2006; Sullivan and Baruch 2009). Initially

focused on the physical boundaries that organizations provide (Arthur 1994), the theory has expanded to include a multitude of other boundaries, such as geographical, cultural, and work-life dimensions (Gubler, Arnold, and Coombs 2014; Hirschi and Koen 2021; Sullivan and Arthur 2006; Wiernik and Kostal 2019). Boundaries are often subjective and interpreted differently across individuals, which creates variability in how they influence career mobility (Rodrigues, Guest, and Budjanovcanin 2016).

Career mobility within boundaryless career theory operates at two levels: within the frames of a set of boundaries (e.g. role evolutions) and beyond those boundaries (e.g. transitions between employment and self-employment) (Sullivan and Arthur 2006; Sullivan and Baruch 2009). Dokko and Jiang (2024) argue that career mobility often involves disruptions to accumulated career attributes, such as competencies, social relationships, and professional self-concept (see also Dokko and Wu 2017). These disruptions can act as barriers or catalysts, hindering routine performance or enabling creative growth influencing an individual's career mobility (Sugiyama, Ladge, and Dokko 2024). For example, transitioning from a corporate role to a startup often entails adapting to rapid decision-making and resource constraints, fostering creative problem-solving while disrupting established routines.

For the purpose of this article, two sets of boundaries are considered in relation to VCP graduates and their utilization of entrepreneurial competencies in careers. The first is *organizational boundaries*, and it refers to the structural and cultural characteristics of organizations that shape career transitions, such as size, industry, hierarchy, and organizational norms (Arthur 1994). The second is *professional boundaries*, referring to the expectations, norms, knowledge, and values associated to a particular profession in order to define roles, behaviours, and self-concept of that profession (Gubler, Arnold, and Coombs 2014).

Organizational boundaries, originally discussed by Arthur (1994), describe the boundaries associated with the physical and structural characteristics of organizations. Organizational boundaries are shaped by the types and structures of organizations in which individuals work. Low organizational mobility involves staying within similar companies or moving between organizations with comparable cultures and structures. High organizational mobility, such as shifting between corporate and startup roles, often requires significant adaptation to new networks, cultural norms, and working conditions (DeFillippi and Arthur 1994; Sullivan and Baruch 2009).

Professional boundaries are frame according to Gubler et al'.s survey item as: 'I usually define myself in terms of my profession rather than in terms of my employer' (2014, 646). This distinction highlights the professional self-concept ind
ividuals hold independent of organizational affiliation. Professional boundaries shape how individuals within (i.e. the profession) interact, maintain relationships, follow ethical standards, and achieve shared objectives (Alvesson and Sandberg 2014; Baron and Markman 2003; Bourdieu 2018; Dokko and Wu 2017; Schein 1996). For instance, the profession of a software engineer encompasses a distinct set of norms, practices, and goals that transcend individual organizations. The context of a profession also includes areas of study, industries, professional jargon, etc (Dokko and Wu 2017; Dor 2015; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2005; Rodrigues, Guest, and Budjanovcanin 2016; Schein 1988).

Low mobility within a professional boundary might involve incremental upskilling to deepen expertise in a particular field. For example, a software engineer might advance by earning certifications or specializing further to build legitimacy as an expert (Rodrigues, Guest, and Budjanovcanin 2016; Sugiyama, Ladge, and Dokko 2024). Conversely, high professional mobility entails transitions across professional boundaries, often accompanied by a fundamental shift in professional self-concept (Dokko and Wu 2017; Sugiyama, Ladge, and Dokko 2024). For instance, moving from a technical engineering role to a healthcare policy position in the med-tech sector involves acquiring new competencies and adapting to domain-specific norms and values (Dlouhy and Biemann 2018; Dokko and Wu 2017; Schein, van Maanen, and Schein 2023; Sullivan and Baruch 2009).

Entrepreneurial competencies

In this study, entrepreneurial competencies are understood as practice-integrated, transferable cognitive and behavioural capacities that support opportunity-driven action and value creation. This definition is informed by Arifin's (2021) competence framework, which distinguishes between *competence* (task-specific proficiency), *competency* (behavioural capacity in context), and *competencies* (a broader, integrated portfolio behavioural capacities). Entrepreneurial competencies are developed through iterative experiences, learning, and reflection. They include, but are not limited to, decision-making under uncertainty, act resourcefully, identify opportunities, communicate persuasively, and mobilize others. Over time, such competencies often become embedded in individuals' professional self-concept, shaping how they evaluate career options and interpret boundaries to these (Schein, van Maanen, and Schein 2023; Sugiyama, Ladge, and Dokko 2024).

For analytical clarity, this study draws on prior research (e.g. Alsos et al. 2023; Haase and Lautenschläger 2011; Kozlinska, Rebmann, and Mets 2023; Kyndt and Baert 2015; Mitchelmore and Rowley 2010; van Gelderen 2020) to organize entrepreneurial competencies into three broad but interconnected categories:

(1) **Process-related competencies**: Domain-specific knowledge and skills related to entrepreneurial tasks, such as business planning, market evaluation, and resource mobilization (Johannisson 1991; Kyndt and Baert 2015).
(2) **Decision-making competencies**: Capacities for strategic judgement, timing, and navigating uncertainty, including both effectual and causal reasoning (Haase and Lautenschläger 2011; Sarasvathy 2001).
(3) **Social competencies**: Interpersonal skills used to build networks, influence stakeholders, and align others around common goals (Baron and Markman 2003; Johannisson 1991).

These categories form the analytical lens through which entrepreneurial competencies are examined in the empirical material.

Method

The empirical setting of this study is careers of VCP graduates. Career mobility patterns of VCP graduates were mapped based on career description provided through interviews. The qualitative approach captures graduates' reflections on their perceived importance of boundaries within professional and organizational contexts, and how these boundaries shaped their career mobility. By focusing on individual reflections, the study explores how graduates interpret and navigate their career, revealing the diversity of perspectives that underpin broader patterns in VCP graduates' career trajectories.

Venture Creation Programs VCPs) are immersive, action-based masters-level programs where students learn through developing a real-life venture. Venturing is integrated with curriculum, assessment, and iterative cycles of action and reflection to provide an experience-based 'learning through' approach with enactive mastery (Donnellon, Ollila, and Williams-Middleton (2014); Lackéus and Williams-Middleton (2015); Ollila and Williams-Middleton (2011). In this study, the VCP label is used to delineate the sampling frame; the empirical focus is on graduates' careers rather than program outcomes.

The VCP graduates represent an interesting population for examining career mobility, given their exposure to both entrepreneurial theory and entrepreneurial practice during their education (Lackéus and Williams-Middleton 2015), and the high utilization of entrepreneurial competencies they lean on in their professional careers (Alsos et al. 2023) In studies on entrepreneurial competencies and VCP graduates, more than 75% utilize these extensively in intrapreneurial, self-employed, and hybrid careers (see Aadland et al. 2024; Alsos et al. 2023).

Data collection and analysis

Using the definition of career (Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence 1989) as sequences of work experiences (over time), the authors focused the data collection on the most experienced graduates (by the definition likely having the most work experiences) available in the targeted population – the first ten cohorts of 272 graduates between 1997–2007. From this target population, a sample of 55 graduates were interviewed. Graduate selection was based upon a search for a variety of careers, and a relative representativeness of the population demographics.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in two phases: Phase 1 took place from June to December 2017 and Phase 2 took place from June to September 2021. The two phases targeted the same graduate cohorts. Phase 2 provided additional empirics to Phase 1 to broaden coverage and assess thematic (empirical) saturation within the same population; it was not theory-driven follow-up sampling of a new subgroup. Both phases of data collection have a similar distribution of gender, age, and spread of work experiences. The interview protocols for both phases were substantively the same, with small evolution of inquiries added in Phase 2. Owing to small cohort sizes and the inclusion of professional domains in the analysis, an anonymity-preserving reporting convention is adopted: quotations are labelled with an anonymous graduate identifier ([IDxx]), and fine-grained combinations of attributes are not presented in this study.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format with questions facilitating reflection on the graduates' career transitions, including motivations for role changes and their influence on competencies development, particularly entrepreneurial activities and associated competencies (drawing on categorizations from e.g. Alsos et al. (2023) and Mitchelmore and Rowley (2010). Also, professional self-concept was a focus topic, in which the graduates were asked to reflect on critical events that had influenced their career mobility.

Interview data were analysed through a structured, iterative procedure. The three categories of entrepreneurial competencies (process-related, decision-making, social) functioned as sensitizing lenses that guided attention during analysis. Themes were developed inductively from graduates' reflections through iterative comparison across researchers. Three researchers independently reviewed each interview transcript, assessing career transitions and individual mobility patterns. Each graduate could exhibit multiple transitions; perceived significance was taken primarily as articulated by graduates (e.g. explicit 'pivotal' or 'new stage' descriptions). Where not explicit, significance was interpreted from narrative weight (time devoted, emphasis, described consequences), and interpretations were reconciled through discussion among the three researchers.

After these independent reviews were completed, the resulting classifications were compared and aggregated to identify broader themes. If a graduate's transitions did not align clearly with any predefined category, the researchers recorded relevant mobility attributes rather than forcing a classification. A particular mobility pattern was only confirmed when it was independently identified by at least two researchers. This process yielded a set of plausible mobility configurations, along with an initial synthesized description for each. A second review of these configurations against the original data served to confirm both empirical fit and alignment with graduates' accounts of how they navigated organizational and professional boundaries. The combined dataset reached thematic saturation, with no new themes emerging during the final stages of analysis. Discrepancies in coding or interpretation were resolved through iterative discussions among the authors, further ensuring coherence and analytical rigour. An example interview analysis is presented in Table 1.

Findings

The findings are presented in two parts: first, an analysis of individual reflections to demonstrate how entrepreneurial competencies are utilized to navigate organizational and professional boundaries. Subsequently, a sample-level analysis of career patterns is presented, highlighting the structural and contextual factors influencing career mobility.

Table 1. Data analysis procedure, an interpretative approach towards coding organizational- and professional context and career mobility.

Example case[1]	Coding of organizational- and professional context from interviews[2]	Coding of career mobility from interviews[3]	Compilation of contexts and entrepreneurial activities.	Type of contextual stability (*Thematic coding*)
Adam[4] has always aimed to be an entrepreneur, driven by a desire for control over his time. Recently, he sold his company, X, but remains its CEO, for now though are looking for new opportunities. With increased family responsibilities, Adam prioritizes more efficient entrepreneurial ventures focused on meaningful impact. He thrives in the startup phase, especially in building technology. Adam enjoys leading as CEO but has started outsourcing administrative tasks to concentrate on value creation. His entrepreneurial journey has evolved; he now feels less risk-hungry and more specialized, though his identity remains deeply tied to entrepreneurship. Looking ahead, Adam plans to continue founding companies or move into investment and advisory roles. He attributes his success to his entrepreneurship education, which gave him the courage and tools to pursue his path.	Organizational context • *Startup* Adam has since his graduation been founding his own firms. He directly reflects on the startup environment as his preferred habitat, stating that the corporate life is the direct opposite of what he values in a 'successful' career. • SME • Corporate • Transient Professional context • *Inductively coded* Adam has had all his career in foodtech and health industries. His main professional motivation as he states it is that he wants to contribute to better health through food innovation.	Organizational context • *Low mobility* Adam has a clear opinion about working in anything else than a small team of founders. In his career, when a venture is maturing and grows to an organizational size that does not suit Adam, he starts looking for the next startup. While he has had a number of startup journeys, he has not ventured into other organizational contexts. • High mobility Professional context • *Low mobility* In his career Adam has not deviated into other contexts than his preferred foodtech/health. The likeliness that a new trajectory is forming is also low, given Adam's strong sentiment towards his professional goal. • High mobility	*Extensive involvement in entrepreneurial activities and associated competencies* Adam has a low mobility in organizational context and the likeliness that he soon will form a new trajectory seems low. He is content with the context of founding and running startups. Adam experiences that entrepreneurial activities is the core in his organizational context and reflect on him being competent in navigating these. Though he also reflect on having a good team around him and complementary competences spread through the team.	• **Stable career** • Profession-dynamic career • Organizational-dynamic career • Transient career

Part I: reflections on entrepreneurial competencies and career mobility

Although the three categories of entrepreneurial competencies guided the analysis, graduates still reported several friction points that did not fit neatly into those categories. In particular, some questioned how well their entrepreneurial competencies matched established organizational norms and described tensions that arose when they tried to utilize them. The data therefore show both alignment and misalignment.

Entrepreneurial competencies were frequently named as essential for moving between organizational types, startups, large corporations, multinational divisions, but graduates emphasized that their usefulness was context-dependent: effective in some settings, hard to utilize in others. One graduate explained:

> My corporate role sharpened my strategic thinking, but the startup years taught me to deliver under tight constraints. I had to judge for myself when "good enough" really was. (ID8)

The example shows that process-related competencies, strategic thinking and operational agility, can travel across organizational boundaries, even if the 'client' of the process changes. Another graduate said that moving between startups and large corporations sharpened the same competencies, especially problem-solving at very different operating tempos. Whereas that account suggests smooth integration, others reported difficulty reconciling expectations about autonomy, communication and pace.

Working in a multinational corporation taught me to navigate bureaucracy and leverage resources, but in [startup name] I learned that I find more motivation working in more fast-paced settings (ID49).

This reflection draws on a period of cross-regional expansion and work alongside a large corporate counterpart, where processes and hand-offs multiplied; moving back into a small, founder-led setting reset the cadence to 'decide-and-do'. Several graduates contrasted corporations and startups in terms of planning, execution and communication, underlining adaptability as a key entrepreneurial competency, but also noting that such adaptability had to be learned, often the hard way. One said:

> In [corporation name], I learned the structured process and the wide-angle view. Once I launched my own startup it was all quick calls and hands-on work, more doing than planning. I can't specialize too deeply now because I have to cover everything outside my tech lane. (ID33)

Another noted:

> Large firms give you resources and networks so you can focus on your role; startups force you to be scrappy and finish the job without all the pieces. It's a trade-off, but I like choosing where to spend my effort instead of being boxed in by a job description. (ID1)

Not all graduates who made the transition from employment to self-employment were content with their career transitions. Several graduates came to the realization that they '*didn't have the risk appetite*' (ID8) they had initially assumed. Despite possessing process-related competencies, such as the ability to handle uncertainty, some struggled to sustain motivation in the face of continuous adaptation and ambiguous expectations. One graduate noted feeling '*constantly reactive rather than strategic*' (ID21), while another described '*losing energy trying to reinvent routines that others didn't value*' (ID3).

At the same time, many graduates did describe how competencies like adaptability and decision-making under uncertainty became essential for interpreting and responding to organizational shifts. They described these competencies as refined through experience, particularly when learning to balance resource stability with creative autonomy. One graduate explained:

> Navigating hierarchical challenges in large organizations taught me to build consensus and communicate strategically. Those same skills proved invaluable when transitioning back to working in startups again. In a sense I feel like the opposite can be said – things I have learned now would have helped me in [large corporation name]. (ID46)

Another graduate echoed this sentiment but also noted the emotional toll of such adaptation: '*You don't notice the shift in how people talk until you land in a big company. Startups move quick and casual; in a corporate you pitch the same idea to three, four layers, and the real call still isn't yours. It wears you down, spending more energy on politics than on fixing the problem. I've learned from both worlds, but I'm happier when I can just make the call myself' (ID13).*

These examples demonstrate that while entrepreneurial competencies were often critical in managing transitions, they also demanded careful calibration to differing organizational logics. For some, that learning process was generative; for others, it exposed the limits of previously successful utilization of specific entrepreneurial competencies. For many, entrepreneurial competencies offered a foundation for both stability and exploration, though not all graduates interviewed described this process as straightforward. One graduate explained how their professional self-concept helped maintain continuity across shifting roles:

> I think of myself first as a problem-solver and ideas person, that's what keeps me steady. The company or job title can change, but it's really about taking those same skills and turning them into something useful wherever I end up. (ID46)

These reflections presented up until now mainly pictures career mobility as energizing and empowering, though several graduates described the process of moving across boundaries as involving discomfort, uncertainty, and even professional doubt. One noted the struggle to '*feel credible again*' (ID4) after crossing into a profession with tighter credential norms than their prior professional context and described a credibility dip during the first months. Another graduate described '*having to justify transferable skills that didn't initially seem relevant*' (ID43), in the first year after a cross-professional boundary move and needing to translate entrepreneurial competencies into the new profession's role definitions. These accounts point to the complex work of aligning competencies with professional legitimacy, highlighting that such mobility often requires more than technical adaptability, it also involves navigating expectations of professional self-concept, belonging, and expertise.

Another broad theme emerged regarding professional boundaries functioning both as stabilizers and as sites for growth, but not always comfortably so. Several graduates described boundaries associated with ethics, expertise, or professional norms as grounding forces that provided meaning and structure. For example:

> In med-tech you can think entrepreneurially, sure, but some lines don't move. Patient safety and ethics stay put. The trick is using those entrepreneurial skills to work inside the hard limits, not to stretch them. (ID21)

Another noted the psychological threshold involved in changing fields:

> Jumping into a new industry was intimidating, so I treated it like any other entrepreneurial project, figure things out as I go. Each switch lets me grab new insights, link them to what I already know, and turn that mix into something useful. (ID7)

While many graduates felt their entrepreneurial competencies smoothed cross-professional moves, others were more guarded. They spoke of initial doubts about credibility and the worry of leaving hard-won, profession-specific knowledge behind. For this group the real tension lay in balancing a stable professional self-concept with the pull of new opportunities. They could draw on decision-making, problem-solving and adaptability, but how far those entrepreneurial competencies carried them depended on whether the new profession's norms were flexible or tightly policed.

Entrepreneurial competencies therefore acted both as inside-boundary tools and as levers for crossing boundaries. Yet graduates rarely portrayed such mobility as frictionless; it came with learning curves and constant recalibration. One noted:

> Moving from the global HQ to a small spin-off in a new industry really sharpened my adaptability. I had to invent local processes, but they still had to slot into the parent company's global playbook, that took quick judgment and clear communication. (ID1)

This graduate's reflection is contextually framed by their boundary crossing: moving out of a resource-stable headquarters role into an early-stage venture, alongside a professional reorientation from trading/operations towards product/venture-building.

Similarly, crossing professional boundaries meant weaving prior expertise into unfamiliar professional knowledge bases, a process marked by humility, uncertainty and ongoing identity work. As one graduate explained:

> Any time I jump into a new field, I start by saying, "Okay, I don't know the rules here yet". Then I break the problem apart, try a few angles, and plug in the stuff I already know. That's how I can move through totally different organizations and still feel like the same problem-solver. (ID3)

Several graduates highlighted the central role, and attendant difficulty, of social and cultural adaptability when their work spanned multiple regions or institutional logics:

> Working in different [geographical and cultural] regions showed me fast that culture isn't copy-paste. You've got to tweak the playbook to fit the local scene but still keep the big picture in view. (ID16)

The same graduate elaborated later as follows:

> . . . communication is everything. I had to turn the same goal into words that clicked for the folks at HQ and the crew on the ground. (ID16)

These cases show that entrepreneurial competencies operate as mediators between unfamiliar settings and an enduring professional self-concept. Exercising them, however, demands substantial cognitive reframing and relationship-building: graduates had to translate familiar capabilities into context-specific practices, often at noticeable emotional and identity cost. Competencies therefore acted less as a portable 'toolkit' and more as resources that required continual reshaping to stay relevant. Across the interviews, this adaptive work surfaced as a core tension, graduates sought both flexibility and a sense of continuity, yet the very competencies that enabled movement could also introduce pressure to keep upgrading 'the self'.

> My ability to adapt and innovate comes from years of honing these entrepreneurial competencies in different contexts, but those same skills give me a thread of continuity wherever I land. (ID30)

Another graduate observed:

> For me it's intentional growth: staying in one place isn't really static if you keep pushing yourself and using your skills in new ways. (ID34)

While these reflections suggest a productive balance, other graduates described experiencing fatigue from too much movement, or stagnation from too little. One commented:

> *I kept switching roles, chasing learning, but started to wonder if I was just avoiding [commitment] (ID3),*

while another said,

> I stayed too long in one place and in my new role [changed industry] I realized I should have moved way sooner. (ID20)

Graduates talked about entrepreneurial competencies doing two things at once: helping them stay rooted in familiar work settings and helping them move on when a new opportunity felt right. Some kept to the same organization or profession and used those competencies to go deeper, refining expertise. Others relied on the very same abilities to step out, chase fresh challenges, or find a closer match with their values. One graduate put it this way:

> Those entrepreneurial skills help me roll with change, but they also keep me grounded, I go for roles that fit my values and what I'm good at. (ID24)

Through the interviews, graduates reported a wide range of strategies for crossing or staying within organizational and professional boundaries. Some stressed stability, using entrepreneurial competencies to deepen expertise inside a familiar setting; others pursued high mobility, switching sectors, roles or regions. Entrepreneurial competencies figured in both patterns, but their contribution was neither uniform nor fully predictable. For certain graduates the competencies supplied coherence

and personal direction; for others they had to be reinterpreted, especially when institutional rules or self-image came under strain.

Part II: sample-level analysis and structural patterns

Following the individual-level reflections in Part I, a broader analysis was conducted to identify recurring career patterns across the VCP graduate sample. Roles, transitions, and graduates' own depictions of key career stages were iteratively compared. While some graduates described a single, defining transition, such as a move from corporate to startup followed by stability, others followed more dynamic paths across both organizational and professional boundaries. Based on these observed patterns, graduates were grouped into five clusters, each reflecting a predominant mode of mobility or stability.

Clustering combined which organizational and/or professional boundaries were crossed, how often, and in what sequence. Several graduates either moved between multiple trajectories over time or expressed ambivalence about the nature of their transitions. In such cases, placement into clusters was guided by the dominant pattern in their narrative, while acknowledging that careers are rarely linear or internally consistent. As a result, the five clusters should be read not as fixed types, but as heuristic tools for exploring the role of entrepreneurial competencies in both career mobility and stability.

Table 2 provides a synthesized view of these clusters, mapping graduates' and their relative mobility patterns in relation to organizational and professional boundaries. It offers a structural way to examine the data at the sample level while reflecting the broader diversity of career experiences among VCP graduates. Though individual journeys often defied tidy categorization, the clusters help surface recurring logics and contrasts in how entrepreneurial competencies were utilized over time.

Stable careers

Graduates in this cluster exhibited low overall mobility, often remaining within a single profession or organizational type over extended periods. Entrepreneurial competencies in these cases were typically used to deepen profession-specific expertise, optimize internal processes, or take on increasing responsibility, rather than to pursue cross-boundary transitions. Cyclic or vertical career moves, such as internal promotions or lateral shifts within related roles, were common and often framed as opportunities for controlled growth. One graduate in this cluster elaborated:

> I've always worked in med-tech, but switching companies every few years allowed me to refine my skills and gain fresh perspectives. Entrepreneurial thinking helped me navigate these changes without requiring a complete career overhaul. (ID2)

For some, this continuity was a deliberate strategy, described as '*building depth*' (ID40) or '*compounding learning*' (ID9). Med-tech in this example above was described as offering a 'steady runway' to refine problem-solving and communication skills without requiring a change in professional self-concept. However, not all graduates in this cluster experienced stability as positive or planned. A few noted missed opportunities or external factors, such as family obligations or organizational inertia, that shaped their long-term paths. As one graduate put it, *'I didn't jump ship, but not because I never thought about it. Things just lined up to keep me here' (ID36)*. Within this cluster, entrepreneurial competencies and entrepreneurial behaviour, was channelled inward, rather than across professional or organizational boundaries.

Singular career transition

For a number of graduates, what began as stable career paths eventually gave rise to discomfort or restlessness, often described as a growing 'itch' to try something different. In these cases, a single pivotal transition (typically between startup and corporate) marked a turning point, after which

Table 2. VCP graduates by career cluster, illustrating each participant's predominant organizational and professional context, and career mobility.

Interview ID	Organizational Context (role changes[5])	Professional Context	Career Cluster
2	Corporate (Cyclic)	Bio-/Medtech	Stable Careers
5	Corporate (Vertical)	Business	($n = 30$)
6	Corporate (Vertical)	Law	
9	Corporate (Vertical)	Software engineering	
10	Startup (Cyclic)	Software engineering	
11	Corporate (Vertical)	Software engineering	
17	Corporate (Cyclic)	Bio-/Medtech	
18	Corporate (Cyclic)	Software engineering	
19	Corporate (Vertical)	Automotive	
20	Corporate (Cyclic)	Design	
24	Corporate (Cyclic)	Software engineering	
25	Startup (Cyclic)	Software engineering	
26	Startup (Cyclic)	Health/Food	
27	Corporate (Cyclic)	Software engineering	
28	Corporate (Vertical)	Logistics	
34	Corporate (Horizontal)	Bio-/Medtech	
36	Corporate (Vertical)	Finance	
37	Corporate (Vertical)	Automotive	
38	Corporate (Vertical)	Education	
39	Startup (Cyclic)	E-commerce	
41	Corporate (Cyclic)	Software engineering	
42	Corporate (Cyclic)	Health/Food	
44	SME (Cyclic)	Bio-/Medtech	
48	Corporate (Cyclic)	Automotive	
50	Corporate (Vertical)	Automotive	
51	Corporate (Vertical)	Software engineering	
52	Corporate (Vertical)	Automotive	
53	Corporate (Cyclic)	Business	
54	Corporate (Cyclic)	Business	
55	Corporate (Vertical)	Finance	
1	Corporate > Startup	Logistics	Singular Career Transition
12	Startup > SME	Cleantech	($n = 12$)
13	Startup > SME	Automotive	
16	Corporate > SME	Manufacturing	
21	Corporate > Startup	Bio-/Medtech	
29	Startup > SME	Logistics	
32	Startup > SME	Software engineering	
33	Corporate > Startup	E-commerce	
35	Startup > SME	Bio-/Medtech	
45	Startup > SME	Business	
47	Startup > SME	Software engineering	
49	Startup > SME	Logistics	
4	Startup > SME	Transient	Profession-dynamic
7	Startup > SME	Transient	($n = 5$)
22	Startup (Cyclic)	Transient	
23	Corporate (Horizontal)	Transient	
31	Corporate (Cyclic)	Transient	
3	Transient	Transient	Transient
30	Transient	Transient	($n = 4$)
43	Transient	Transient	
46	Startup > Transient	Transient	
8	Transient	Business	Organization-dynamic
40	Transient	Energy	($n = 2$)

graduates settled into a new long-term trajectory. This pattern, observed across the sample, is referred to here as Singular Career Transition.

Entrepreneurial competencies were described as instrumental in making the leap, especially in adjusting to unfamiliar organizational cultures, expectations, and rhythms. However, these transitions were not always smooth or complete. Several graduates reflected on the internal recalibration required, not only to navigate a new context but to reconfigure how

existing competencies could be utilized or expanded. One graduate recounted a multi-layered shift from corporate to founding a startup, and then to SME leadership (when the startup grew):

> I realized after five years that I missed the thrill of new projects, so I finally jumped into it [a startup]. Founding my own firm was transformative, but a lot of what I needed I already had [referring to entrepreneurial competencies]. But as the company grew, I had to shift into a leadership role that demanded very different competencies. That transition wasn't easy, but it taught me how to lead effectively. (ID12)

While this graduate ultimately found a sense of fit in the new environment, others described lingering ambivalence. Some questioned whether the choice had closed off future paths; others felt that the competencies developed in the earlier context remained underused or undervalued. The transition itself was often framed as clarifying, but also as exposing the limits of existing professional self-concept. In this way, entrepreneurial competencies were both enablers of change and objects of redefinition, shaped through the challenge of navigating a singular but transformative career shift.

Profession-dynamic careers

Graduates in this cluster made significant transitions across professional boundaries, shifting between fields with distinct norms, knowledge bases, and expectations. These moves often required more than just technical reskilling; they also involved having a professional self-concept supporting this mobility. Entrepreneurial competencies were cited as helpful in managing these transitions, particularly in terms of managing uncertainty, and the ability to translate previous experience from one profession to another. Yet these competencies were not always sufficient on their own. Graduates often described moments of disorientation, steep learning curves, and the need to renegotiate how they were perceived by others in the new field.

> Moving from engineering to healthcare policy was a leap, but my entrepreneurial problem-solving skills enabled me to navigate the complexities of a new field while building on my existing expertise. (ID23)

In this cluster, entrepreneurial competencies served as bridging mechanisms, but they also had to be recalibrated, sometimes downplayed or translated, depending on the expectations of the new profession. These accounts suggest that professional mobility was not just about applying existing strengths, but also about adapting one's story and status to align with different professional logics.

Transient careers

This cluster included graduates who experienced frequent transitions across both organizational and professional boundaries, often shifting roles, sectors, or geographic contexts. These careers were marked by exploration, experimentation, and a pursuit of novelty, but also, in some cases, by discontinuity and ambivalence. Entrepreneurial competencies such as opportunity recognition, networking, and adaptive thinking were commonly cited as tools for navigating this fluidity. However, several graduates also reflected on the strain of repeated transitions and the challenge of sustaining a coherent professional self-concept over time. One graduate framed their career as one of synthesis:

> Each industry taught me something new. Entrepreneurial skills like networking and opportunity evaluation allowed me to gather insights and combine them in innovative ways that drive value. (ID30)

While this narrative emphasizes integration and innovation, other narratives describe a more fragmented experience. One graduate noted, *'After a while, people started asking why I kept moving, I didn't have a good answer'* (ID43) Another said, *'I learned a lot, but sometimes I felt like I was starting from scratch every two years'* (ID46). These accounts suggest that entrepreneurial competencies were not always sufficient to counterbalance questions of direction, recognition, or emotional fatigue.

Organization-dynamic careers

This cluster represents the least common type of careers in the sample, with just two graduates. This cluster included graduates who remained within a single profession or field of expertise yet frequently moved between different organizational types, such as shifting from startups to large corporations, or moving between public and private sector roles. Entrepreneurial competencies played a visible role in enabling these transitions, particularly in helping individuals adapt to new structures, cultures, and expectations without losing sight of their core professional self-concept.

> Staying in one profession gave me depth, but working in different types of organizations showed me how to apply my skills in innovative ways. Entrepreneurial thinking enabled me to maximize the potential of each role. (ID40)

In this cluster, entrepreneurial competencies were often used to bridge differing expectations across organizations, helping graduates translate ideas, navigate internal structures, or advocate for change. But these competencies were not always evenly recognized or rewarded; one graduate described needing to subtly recalibrate their approach in each new setting. This narrative suggests that while stability in profession can offer a sense of continuity, repeated organizational transitions still require considerable professional self-concept work.

Discussion

This study examined how entrepreneurial competencies enable individuals to navigate career mobility across organizational and professional boundaries. The findings show that entrepreneurial competencies shaped graduates' careers in diverse ways. While some graduates described them as sources of continuity and confidence, others found that the same competencies required continuous recalibration and sometimes met structural or cultural limits. Across the five career clusters, graduates illustrated how entrepreneurial competencies supported both long-term stability and mobility.

Entrepreneurial competencies role in boundary navigation

This study examined how entrepreneurial competencies enable individuals to navigate career mobility across organizational and professional boundaries. The findings indicate that entrepreneurial competencies shaped graduates' careers in multiple ways. While some graduates described entrepreneurial competencies as sources of continuity and confidence, other graduates reported that the same competencies required continuous recalibration and occasionally encountered structural or cultural limits.

Across the five career clusters, graduates illustrated how entrepreneurial competencies supported both long-term stability and mobility. The observed patterns were dynamic rather than binary; many graduates experienced phases of uncertainty, self-concept work, and emotional strain. Entrepreneurial competencies emerged from graduates' concrete work, e.g. ideating and implementing new business activity. Graduates referred to entrepreneurial competencies when making sense of ambiguity, exercising judgement, and mobilizing colleagues, which aligns with research that positions competencies as situational resources that evolve during a career (Alsos et al. 2023; Arthur 2014; DeFillippi and Arthur 1994; Penaluna and Penaluna 2021).

Process-related competencies appeared in accounts of designing new workflows or imposing order in undefined roles (Johannisson 1991; Kyndt and Baert 2015). Decision-making competencies appeared in descriptions of timing, trade-offs, and effectual reasoning under uncertainty (Sarasvathy 2001). Social competencies surfaced when graduates aligned diverse stakeholders and negotiated hierarchies (Baron and Markman 2003).

Over time, entrepreneurial competencies embedded themselves in each graduate's professional self-concept and functioned both as levers for boundary crossing and as anchors that preserved a coherent sense of self Ibarra (1999); Schein, van Maanen, and Schein (2023);

Sugiyama, Ladge, and Dokko (2024). This pattern supports arguments that entrepreneurial competencies are adaptive, context-linked resources rather than firm-specific tools (Alsos et al. 2023).

Prior literature often portrays entrepreneurial careers as inherently transient (Burton, Sørensen, and Dobrev 2016; Marshall and Gigliotti 2020). The present findings demonstrate that stability and mobility can coexist along a single continuum. In the 'Stable' and 'Singular-Transition' clusters, graduates utilized entrepreneurial competencies to pursue incremental growth within existing boundaries, echoing Wiernik and Kostal (2019). In the 'Transient', 'Organisation-Dynamic', and 'Profession-Dynamic' clusters, graduates leveraged adaptability and opportunity recognition to shift between roles and settings, consistent with Sullivan and Baruch (2009).

When graduates crossed organizational boundaries, strategic thinking, judgement under uncertainty, and networking enabled adaptation to unfamiliar structures and cultures (DeFillippi and Arthur 1994; Dokko and Wu 2017; Hytti 2010). Crossing professional boundaries demanded reinterpretation of the same competencies so they matched profession-specific values. The success of any boundary-crossing move often depended on the permissiveness of the target profession's norms (Dokko and Jiang 2024; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2005; Schein 1996). Furthermore, graduates combined multiple competencies to address complex challenges, producing integrative use that deepened expertise in one context while constraining perceived mobility elsewhere, an effect consistent with path-dependence research (Dlouhy and Biemann 2018).

Overall, this study finds that the same entrepreneurial competencies supported both stability and mobility: graduates used them to deepen expertise within boundaries and to navigate transitions across them.

Implications for boundaryless career theory in entrepreneurship research

This study contributes to boundaryless career theory by showing how entrepreneurial competencies mediate the relationship between stability and mobility in contemporary careers. Boundaryless-career scholarship often highlights high mobility and independence from organizational constraints (Arthur 1994; Sullivan and Arthur 2006). The present findings demonstrate that entrepreneurial careers also involve deliberate, iterative development within, and not only across, organizational and professional boundaries. Graduates did not move reactively; rather, they used decision-making under uncertainty, strategic thinking and networking to chart purposeful career transitions.

The results reinforce Wiernik and Kostal's (2019) observation that stability persists even in settings labelled 'boundaryless'. Many graduates chose stability as a strategy: they refined entrepreneurial competencies inside familiar structures, aligning day-to-day roles with core values and long-term goals. Problem-solving and social-interaction competencies, for example, enhanced effectiveness and preserved professional self-concept within a single organizational setting. Organizational and professional boundaries therefore functioned not only as barriers but also as arenas for developing and utilizing entrepreneurial competencies. This pattern echoes Sugiyama, Ladge, and Dokko (2024), who frame career transitions as periods of both disruption and growth. The findings also extends Rodrigues, Guest, and Budjanovcanin (2016) argument that career mobility is context-sensitive, shaped simultaneously by individual agency and contextual constraint; in this study, stability emerged as an actively cultivated and valued option rather than a residual state.

Contextual insights: entrepreneurial careers in Scandinavia

The study illustrates how the Scandinavian context influences entrepreneurial careers. Scandinavia's vocational landscape, marked by comprehensive welfare systems, egalitarian norms and a policy focus on innovation, collaboration and sustainability, creates conditions that support entrepreneurial activity in and across organizational and professional boundaries (Berggren and Olofsson 2021; Johannisson 2004; Neergaard and Thrane 2011).

Although public funding, collaborative work cultures and robust social safety nets lower the perceived risk of career moves, the evidence shows that many graduates prefer to utilize entrepreneurial competencies inside a single organizational or professional domain rather than undertake repeated boundary crossings. Graduates described iterative, role-specific development in startups, corporations and industry-niche firms where entrepreneurial competencies could be honed without changing context. Such trajectories appear to represent a strategic balance between personal goals and opportunity structures in Scandinavia.

The findings extend debates on entrepreneurial career mobility by showing that regional conditions shape not only available opportunities but also the career strategies graduates consider feasible. In the Scandinavian setting, entrepreneurial competencies function simultaneously as tools for opportunity seeking and as stabilizers that connect work roles to personal values and organizational realities (Schein, van Maanen, and Schein 2023; Sugiyama, Ladge, and Dokko 2024). The regional ecosystem therefore influences both the level and form of mobility viewed as desirable.

While the results challenge the idea that entrepreneurial success requires frequent transitions, they also emphasize the value of developing depth within chosen boundaries. Because the study is anchored in a specific welfare-state context, caution is needed when extending the insights to regions with different institutional arrangements or entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Practical implications and future research

The findings have direct implications for career development practice, organizational policy and entrepreneurship education. First, employment status alone offers only a partial view of entrepreneurial careers; practical guidance can draw on career anchors and protean orientations to focus on the individual's professional self-concept (Schein, van Maanen, and Schein 2023; Wiernik and Kostal 2019). In practice, an individual-centric framing, rather than employment-status labels, can guide development conversations and role design so that boundary crossings, or deliberate stability, fit core values and strengths, while entrepreneurial competencies are mobilized to create value inside and across organizational and professional boundaries.

Second, entrepreneurship education should emphasize competencies that extend beyond firm founding and support employability by enabling graduates to cross organizational and professional boundaries, adapt to varied contexts, and align career choices with emerging opportunities.

Future research should investigate the development and use of entrepreneurial competencies in non-Scandinavian regions, analysing how local institutions interact with career mobility. Longitudinal designs could trace how entrepreneurial competencies mature over time and affect career trajectories at different professional stages. Comparative studies across diverse entrepreneurial ecosystems would further clarify contextual influences on mobility. Finally, researchers should continue to decouple entrepreneurial self-concept from firm formation and adopt person-centred perspectives that recognize how entrepreneurial activity often transcends legal or structural firm boundaries (Alsos et al. 2023, Chan et al., 2012; Schein 1995; Williams-Middleton, Lackéus, and Lundqvist 2021).

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that entrepreneurial careers are *boundaryless in potential* but *anchored by choice*, reflecting a deliberate balancing act where individuals leverage flexibility while prioritizing continuity within specific professional and organizational contexts. Entrepreneurial competencies are shown to be pivotal in shaping career mobility, enabling graduates to navigate and transcend boundaries in both organizational and professional contexts. Entrepreneurial competencies contribute to career mobility through refinement, integration, and path dependency, resulting in both enabling and stabilizing how VCP graduates perceive career boundaries. By integrating boundaryless career theory and the lens of entrepreneurial competencies, the findings provide a nuanced

understanding of entrepreneurial careers as both stable and mobile. The Scandinavian context further highlights how regional values and structures influence the utilization of these competencies, offering insights for research and practice in entrepreneurship and career development.

Notes

1. Each interview resulted in rich data and the transcript material covers 50–70 minutes of data for each interview. Here we present an author team internal summary utilized in the comparison and discussion of authors' compiled findings. This illustrative case is summarized along themes identified.
2. First independently coded by each author, then compiled in joint coding session. The authors were consistent in identifying and coding the empirical material.
3. First independently coded by each author, then compiled in joint coding session. The authors were consistent in identifying and coding the empirical material.
4. Name changed for anonymity.
5. Terminology adapted from Vinkenburg and Weber (2012).

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