

Being adaptable can keep you in the wrong place

You can perform well in a role that does not fit. That is why functioning is not reliable evidence that the situation is right.

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Some poor fits are hard to see. The work gets done. Difficult conversations happen. When the brief is unclear, you supply the missing logic. When different interests collide, you find language everyone can work with. From the outside, there is every reason to think you are in the right place.

The effort no one sees

You prepare more carefully than the conversation should require. You phrase one clear idea several ways, trying to judge which version the room can hear. You take responsibility without knowing whether you are allowed to decide. You spot a problem early, then wait until other people are ready to see it too.

All of this may be professional maturity. It may be what makes collaboration possible. But when it becomes the permanent operating model, adaptability hides a different question: does the role fit, or have you simply become very good at compensating for its faults?

The hidden side of competence

When someone cannot meet the demands of a role, the mismatch usually becomes visible. Deadlines slip, quality falls or conflict can no longer be ignored. With a highly capable person, the opposite may happen. They compensate so effectively that the situation appears stable.

They turn a vague brief into a useful result. They connect parts of the organisation whose relationship has never been properly designed. They hold together working relationships that should be supported by clearer responsibilities. Along the way, they translate between expertise, hierarchy and competing interests. What the structure fails to provide, they supply through personal effort.

This protects the organisation from the consequences of its own ambiguity. It also protects the mismatch from being recognised.

The misleading conclusion is simple: because you can handle the work, the work must suit you. Performance proves that you can deliver. It says far less about the unnecessary compensation involved, whether your strongest abilities are being used well, or whether the situation can be sustained.

Adaptability is not the problem

No work with other people is possible without adjustment. Colleagues think at different speeds, care about different things and need different information. Good work requires consideration, translation and a willingness not to treat every personal preference as a principle.

A well-matched role still contains routine, compromise and difficult periods. Fit does not mean permanent ease or complete agreement. If every irritation becomes evidence that the environment is wrong, no real job can pass the test.

Adaptability becomes costly when it no longer bridges occasional differences but permanently compensates for weaknesses in the role. Flexibility then becomes a second job. You are not only doing the work; you are continually making the conditions of the work bearable for yourself and often for everyone else.

Adults who think very quickly may have practised this for years. They may have learnt to slow down, add the steps that others need, or turn the intensity down. These can be valuable social skills. They should not become an obligation to make your own way of working unrecognisable wherever you go.

What the cost can look like

One hard week tells you very little. The pattern over time is more revealing.

A large share of your energy may go into translation and reassurance before the real work begins. You are valued for reliability, but rarely asked to use the kind of judgement that matters to you. You carry responsibility for results without enough influence over the decisions or conditions behind them. Your standards become a private burden because the organisation neither asks for the same quality nor openly agrees where to compromise.

You function during the day but take far too long to come down from it. You become increasingly skilled at fitting in while becoming less certain about what you need in order to do good work.

None of these signs proves a structural mismatch on its own. Together, they often show that visible performance is only part of the story.

Why the usual advice can miss the point

The standard advice sounds sensible: be more patient, communicate more strategically, prioritise, build resilience, choose your battles. Any of it may help. None of it tells you whether the role itself is sensibly designed.

If the remit is unclear, better communication may make the ambiguity manageable for a while. If decision rights are missing, greater patience may simply postpone the point at which you recognise the limit. If the work uses only a narrow part of your ability, more resilience may help you remain there for longer.

This does not make personal development irrelevant. It prevents every difficulty from being recast as an individual shortcoming. Sometimes a person does need to communicate more clearly or wait for a better moment. Sometimes the environment really is too slow, narrow or contradictory. Often, both are true.

A useful review keeps those possibilities open until there is enough evidence to tell them apart.

Fit is a practical question

At work, “fit” can sound like comfort or personal preference. The question here is more concrete: can the work, responsibility, way of working and environment come together in a way that uses your ability without requiring you to repair missing clarity and unsuitable conditions every day?

The answer may differ at each level. The work can be interesting while the role lacks authority. The role can be sound while the team avoids serious disagreement. The organisation can be attractive while the immediate manager interferes unnecessarily. Personal circumstances matter too: a role that was sustainable at one stage of life may ask too much at another.

That is why “the job does not fit” is rarely precise enough. It collapses several possible causes and can lead to the wrong change. Someone who needs more authority may look for more variety. Someone who needs clearer boundaries may become self-employed and meet the same ambiguity in client work. Someone who misses technical depth may move into management and spend even more time coordinating.

The more precisely the mismatch is described, the smaller and more realistic the next step can become.

Test before making a larger move

Some structural questions can be tested where you are. A clearer remit, a different split of responsibilities, protected time for demanding work, or a defined project with genuine authority may show whether the fit improves.

The test needs to be specific. “More responsibility” is too vague. A more useful agreement might give you authority to decide defined actions in one area rather than merely recommend them. “More challenge” is equally loose. Which problems offer greater depth, and which simply add volume?

Not everything can be changed within a role. Power, business model, leadership culture and the underlying nature of the work impose real limits. A test is not a promise that staying will work. It provides information: what changes when one condition improves, and what remains exactly as it was?

From coping to choosing

You do not need to become less adaptable. You need to become more deliberate about what you use that ability for.

Adaptation can be a professional choice. You explain a complex issue in a way other people can use. You accept a slower process because a sound decision needs several perspectives. You make a compromise whose purpose and limits are clear.

It is different when your adaptability permanently replaces what the role should provide: clear responsibility, workable decisions, suitable challenge and the chance to raise a well-founded concern.

In that situation, your ability to keep functioning does not show that the role fits. It shows only that you can continue to carry it - not that you should.

A note on the evidence

People can perform well in a role for a long time and still pay a high price for doing so. Research on person-job fit, job crafting and the experience of workers with high cognitive ability offers useful pointers. Whether adaptability is hiding a mismatch still needs to be examined in the individual case.

References

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