

Career Development and Aging

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Definitions

Career development is defined as the developmental process of an employee along a path of experience and employment in one or more organizations (Baruch and Rosenstein 1992) or a “life-long process of managing work experiences within or between organizations” (Business Dictionary 2015). Late career development is thus the career development of older workers. Some authors define the late career stage as early as from age 40, but usually it is defined as the career of employees aged from 50 years old up to retirement (Hedge and Borman 2012).

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Traditional Views on Late Career Development

Career development over the life-span is usually described by career stage theories. These career development theories describe career development over the life-span as a continuous sequence of stages through which the individual gradually passes. The most influential of these theories are the theories of Super (Super 1990), Levinson (1986), and Cron (1984). Super’s life-span model contains five large career stages: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and decline (Super 1990). These stages pose distinct career developmental tasks which people need to fulfill in order to successfully master the next career stage. In the growth stage, one’s self-concept needs to be developed and work-related attitudes and needs should be identified. In the exploration stage, the relevant tasks are to identify interests and capabilities, find a professional self-image, and establish an optimal fit between the self and work. In the establishment phase, career commitment needs to be increased, career advancement and growth achieved, and a stable work and personal life created. In the maintenance phase, one’s self-concept needs to be maintained and people have to hold onto accomplishments achieved previously. Finally, in the decline phase, workers need to develop a new self-image that is independent of career success (Super 1990). In Levinson’s life stage developmental model, the career developmental stages are determined

according to one's age, and life periods of stability are usually followed by life periods of change (Levinson 1986). Levinson describes early (age 20–40), middle (age 40–60), and late adulthood (age 60 and over). These life stages have prescriptive developmental tasks: in early adulthood one needs to create and test initial choices about preferences for adult living, develop a sense of personal identity in the world of work and nonwork, and strive toward achievement of personal and professional goals. In middle adulthood one needs to review the life structure earlier adopted and make strong commitments to work, family, and community. In late adulthood one needs to recognize mortality and limits on achievements and answer the questions raised by these issues (Levinson 1986). Cron's career stage theory (Cron 1984) is the third influential theory that describes adult development in the work context. Cron describes career concerns, developmental tasks, personal challenges, and psychosocial needs of each career stage. The four career stages comprise (1) *exploration* (finding an appropriate occupational field), (2) *establishment* (successfully establishing a career in a certain occupation), (3) *maintenance* (holding on to what has been achieved, reassessing the career and possible redirection), and (4) *disengagement* (completing one's career) (Cron 1984). Whereas in the earlier stages of one's career, achievement, autonomy, and competition are important, in the later career stages, reduced competitiveness, higher need for security, generational motives (helping younger colleagues), and, finally, detachment from the organization and the organizational life are central topics.

These three stage models prescribe that older workers have to detach from work and gradually establish a self-identity independent of their career. The described developmental tasks reflect traditional career paths pursued in a small number of organizations, when after a linear and rather conformal working life, older workers are assumed to prepare for retirement.

However, a few decades have passed since the introduction of the delineated career theories, and the working environment underwent some substantial changes in that time. Today, many

countries and organizations are faced with an aging workforce and often longer-lasting careers (Schweitzer et al. 2014). In most developed countries, the number of late career employees is expected to grow substantially in the next decades due to declining birth rates and longer life expectancies (Van Der Heijden et al. 2008) meaning that companies are in need of healthy, productive, and motivated older workers to remain in the workforce longer in order to satisfy the demand for well-educated and experienced staff.

Changing Career Contexts

Whereas the traditional career theories assumed an intra-firm focus, environmental stability, and hierarchically advancing careers which progressed in a linear manner, today's work environment is characterized by increasing competitiveness and complexity, fewer opportunities for vertical mobility, higher levels of voluntary as well as involuntary inter-organizational mobility, and heightened probabilities of job loss at every career level and stage (Greenhaus and Kossek 2014; Sullivan 1999). Due to global competition, organizations increasingly need to be lean and flexible in order to compete internationally and increasingly opt for short-term transactional exchanges with their employees instead of traditional long-term employment relationships (Direnzo and Greenhaus 2011). This change is also reflected in new psychological career contracts (Hall and Mirvis 1995) which refer to the mutual expectations between employees and employers regarding their career and work. Traditional psychological contracts previously focused on loyalty between the employee and the organization and an expectation of job security in exchange for loyal service of the employee. The new career contract describes the shift from the formerly organizationally driven career to the employee-driven career and focuses on rather short-term transactions of work effort in exchange for career development opportunities (Hall and Mirvis 1995).

Protean Career Orientation: The Necessity of Self-Directed Career Management

As reviewed above, the traditional career theories introduced in the first section described the late career as a phase of general disengagement, decline, and finally withdrawal from work. These theories need to be complemented by newer understandings of late careers, especially considering the contextual changes in the work environment described in the previous section. The *protean career* describes such a modern type of career that corresponds to the demands that the before-mentioned changes in today's work environment pose on employees (Inkson 2006). The protean career orientation highlights the importance of individual and value-driven agency of the worker when developing one's career according to subjective success criteria (Direnzo and Greenhaus 2011). With careers being less predictable and structured by the organization, employees need to increasingly customize and self-manage their careers in order to balance out the risks of a growingly insecure work environment. Especially for late career employees who might have had a rather traditional career path and did not get accustomed to changes in the labor market, the risk of getting unintentionally laid off might be highly stressful and increases the importance to remain employable as an older worker. Because the protean career is primarily values driven and self-directed, holding a protean career orientation is an adaptive response to performance and learning demands in the current work environment (Sullivan and Baruch 2009).

Greenhaus et al. (2009) emphasize the importance of a protean, self-directed career orientation especially in the maintenance phase: late career employees need to remain productive and satisfy their needs for security and to feel useful as well as potential motivations for passing on their knowledge to younger colleagues through activities such as mentoring. In the late career, sustainability and meaningful work that is aligned with one's values becomes of higher subjective importance. To this end, Newman (2011) describes a model of

sustainable careers with three central propositions that can be of great value for older workers especially: (1) being *renewable* (renewing assignments, refocusing, re-education) in order to prevent burnout and create resilience and engagement in employees; (2) being *flexible* (continuous learning, adaptability) in order to prevent stagnation, facilitate innovation, and create an optimal alignment between employer and employee needs; and (3) being *integrative* (bringing disparate information together, knowledge management) in order to highlight the bigger picture, apply knowledge in new ways, create a meaningful contribution at work, and retain critical knowledge. Sustainable careers provide benefits for both organizations and employees: older employees can stay fully engaged and have the capacity to impart knowledge and use specialized knowledge in new ways. Late career employees are also well suited to integrate knowledge across units and functions as well as to mentor younger colleagues and can thus improve intergenerational relationships as well as facilitate the development of younger generations. From the employer's point of view, sustainable careers enable more productive, motivated, and healthier employees as well as lower employment costs through reduced turnover and better knowledge retention (Newman 2011).

Despite the necessity and benefits of enabling older workers to remain active and valuable at work, research demonstrated that late career employees receive less support from supervisors to participate in career development activities and have generally less access to organizational career support programs (Van Der Heijden 2006). Because older workers have often spent a significant part of their careers developing organization-based identities and job-specific skills, it is of particular importance for this population to acquire the skills needed for the protean, employee-driven career. Of highest importance is the acquisition of so-called meta-skills (Hall and Mirvis 1995). Meta-skills help to acquire new skills and encompass the knowledge of learning how to learn, developed through many career learning cycles – or continuous learning – instead of a single lifelong career

stage cycle. According to Hall and Mirvis (1995), the most important of these meta-skills are identity awareness and heightened adaptability. Identity awareness is considered to be a fundamental resource for career development (Rosso et al. 2010). Because the work domain has a large importance in people's life, individuals identify with key characteristics of their work. Particularly older workers look for meaning in their life and in their work. This meaning can only be found if individuals find their own answers to their identity questions: Who am I? Who do I want to become? What is important to me in the work role? The traditional career paths provided a sense of stability and predictability for employees that facilitated addressing such identity issues. However, in the current work context, employees need to create stability within themselves (i.e., develop a clear professional identity that gives meaning to their work experiences) in order to successfully manage their careers in a self-directed manner. For older workers, who are more likely to be values driven (Briscoe et al. 2006), less likely to be motivated by extrinsic rewards, and more motivated to act autonomously (Ryff 1995), a clear self-concept may already be present. However, this self-concept needs to be constantly reexamined and reconstructed as work demands and typical career development tasks change in late career.

Career Adaptability

Apart from identity, career adaptability represents the second meta-competency for a self-directed career (Hall and Mirvis 1995). The reviewed career development stage theories imply a sequential and predictable order where experiences, skills, and competencies acquired in the stage before are sufficient preparation to enter the next stage. Thus inherent to stage models of career development is the notion of readiness to move to the next stage. In Super's work, for example, individuals who are ready to make educational and vocational choices are thought to possess career maturity (Savickas 1997). Career maturity was thought to be particularly relevant for

adolescents, but the concept of adaptation seemed more appropriate for adults (Super and Knasel 1981). This focus on adaptation highlights the "continual need to respond to new circumstances and novel situations, rather than to master a predictable and linear continuum of developmental tasks" (Savickas 1997, p. 254). Thus adaptation or adaptability are concepts well suited to the new career context where the capacity to adjust rapidly and display flexibility are prerequisites for career development. Adaptability specific to the career context, known as career adaptability, is a psychosocial coping resource, a set of self-regulation capacities or skills, important for problem solving, career transitions, responding to unexpected events, constructing a career reality, and participating in the work role (Savickas et al. 2009; Savickas and Porfeli 2012).

Because adaptability is a meta-competency (Hall and Mirvis 1995), adaptability permits individuals to develop the skills and competencies associated with a protean career orientation. Career adaptability may thus be a specially beneficial resource for older workers by enabling career orientations more suited to the new career context such as a protean orientation (Chan et al. 2015) and by helping them successfully address specific career development tasks. Because the challenges of reorienting and updating one's knowledge, skills, and abilities may be particularly evident for older workers, their career adaptability may be an especially useful resource in this regard. The psychosocial aspect of career adaptability is paramount and suggests a responsiveness to the context or environment where adaptability resources can be activated as needed, such as in response to unemployment or during career transitions (Ebberwein et al. 2004; McMahon et al. 2012).

Career adaptability consists of four dimensions: (1) *concern* about the future that includes the anticipation of demands and challenges; (2) *control* entails a personal responsibility for actively managing the self and the environment; (3) *curiosity* implies a broadening of options and self and environment exploration; and finally (4) the *confidence* to implement one's plans (Savickas and Porfeli 2012). Thus, using the

meta-competency of adaptability, older workers can anticipate that changes may be required, can explore solutions and options to best implement these changes, and can confidently enact the necessary changes. This allows older workers to address the career development tasks of being flexible and open to professional reorientation. Although physical mobility is likely to decrease with age, psychological mobility remains unchanged with age (Segers et al. 2008) suggesting that opportunities for mobility still exist for older workers. Older workers' adaptability may help them envision more flexible work options that combine paid work with nonwork activities reflecting personal interests, made possible by the increased blurring of the boundaries between work and nonwork domains of life (Hall and Mirvis 1995).

Empirically, the specific subject of career adaptability in older workers has not yet received focused attention. However, a select number of qualitative studies with either mid-career employees (Eggerwein et al. 2004) or women aged above 50 (McMahon et al. 2012; Whiston et al. 2015) highlighted career adaptability as a theme associated to positive experiences at work and transitions. In a quantitative study among a sample of workers older than 54, Zacher and Griffin (2015) found that adaptability positively predicted job satisfaction over time (more strongly for those with still a few years left before retirement), suggesting that enhancing career adaptability may contribute to the retention of older workers.

Conclusions and Implications

An aging population and workforce provide the opportunity for many people to look forward to a longer, healthier, and more satisfying life and late career. Nevertheless the aging of the workforce also entails some challenges for late career employees as well as for organizations that need to be addressed. In the current chapter, we outlined traditional career development theories and their developmental tasks and put them in relation to new career concepts and changes in

the work environment. Special emphasis was put on the protean career orientation and career adaptability that represent very important career resources (Hirschi 2012) also for older workers. However, there is a need for more research to address how a protean career orientation and career adaptability are affected by age, how older workers understand career adaptability, what career development tasks in the late career (such as changing jobs) mean for older workers, and how a protean career orientation and career adaptability can help older workers cope with these challenges. Future research should also investigate how age influences relationships between protean career orientations, career adaptability, and outcomes over the life-span as well as the magnitude of these effects (Zacher and Griffin 2015).

Also, career counselors should highlight the importance of a protean career orientation and career adaptability for older workers and create interventions aimed at anticipating future demands and challenges. Interventions could emphasize the personal responsibility for actively managing the self and the environment, evoke self and environment exploration through demonstrating and brainstorming possible options, and finally foster the confidence of older workers to implement their plans.

Organizations and HR management should place special emphasis on late career employees and their career development. Most importantly, stereotyping against older workers should be counteracted and awareness about the potentials of older workers raised. A more heterogeneous workforce can be advantageous for organizations (Kunze and Böhm 2013). By providing generative opportunities for older workers (e.g., have older workers act as mentors for younger employees), older workers can feel needed and appreciated and make their work more meaningful. At the same time, younger workers get access to valuable experience and accumulated knowledge, and knowledge retention for critical know-how in the organization is enhanced.

In sum, if older workers stay self-reflective and curious about their career values, preferences, and needs, today's increasingly individualized and

horizontal careers might be well suited to them (Wang et al. 2012) and enable a successful and sustainable late career phase. The meta-competencies of adaptability and identity can help older workers establish the skills and competencies associated with the protean career orientation and consequently extend a productive and satisfying career maintenance phase. When it comes time to fully or partially disengage from the work role, identity and adaptability meta-competencies will also support this transition.

Cross-References

- ▶ Older Workers
- ▶ Proactivity and Aging at Work
- ▶ Role of Age in Workplace Mentoring
- ▶ Sustainable Employability and Aging
- ▶ Training at Work and Aging

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