A typology of career growth among men in middle and later career

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Although it is widely known that the working population is ageing, studies of the second half of career remain few and far between. There is consequently a lack of diagnostic tools to guide individuals and organisations in managing this period of career. On the basis of an intensive research study with a diverse group of 41 men, we propose a model describing four characteristic outlooks on middle and later career which is intended to stimulate discussion of how career interventions can be matched to individual needs. Key aspects of this model are the character and salience of growth motivation, and the continuing centrality of work and career in this period of individuals' lives.

Mounting awareness of the challenge posed by ageing populations is kindling interest in a portion of career – middle and later career – which is notorious for its neglect by both academics and practitioners (Greller & Stroh, 1995; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004).

Mid-career is when most individuals encounter the career plateau, if they have not already done so. It is also a period when, according to traditional theory (Hall & Mansfield, 1975; Super, Savickas & Super, 1995), most individuals gradually make the transition from an expansive and growth-oriented outlook on career to a more stationary and conservative one. Advancement, challenge and learning dwindle in importance relative to maintaining one's position, keeping up with change and at best modest innovation. This transition – from career growth to career maintenance – may frequently be linked to plateauing, but is nevertheless distinct from it, since individuals may continue to experience informal or intrinsic growth (i.e. in knowledge, experience and competence) long after any interest in, or realistic prospect of, formal advancement has died. The distinction is most obvious in occupations (e.g. lawyer, doctor, teacher, priest) where much the larger part of career may comprise a plateau (Driver, 1994), but is also relevant to settings where career is understood as hierarchical progression. People's formal and informal career trajectories, although often closely interrelated, are best understood as at least partly independent. Both trajectories merit investigation.

The question of continuing growth in middle and later career is important for both individuals and organisations because of the link between growth and creative engagement with work (Hall, 1986; Hall & Rabinowitz, 1988). People who experience career growth are expanding their opportunity and ability to contribute. Continuing growth, especially where it takes intrinsic forms, is crucial in middle and later career, since it can counteract the common middle age experiences of feeling stale, ground down, and drained by the unrelenting pressures of work and responsibility (Tamir, 1989). When people start to feel tired and jaded, growth can help to renew their energies and enthusiasm.

The scale of the career management task now facing organisations and individuals is conveyed by projections (ONS, 2007) which indicate that over-40s will outnumber under-40s in the workforce by 2020. A consequence of career plateauing and the transition to career maintenance is that organisations may increasingly be populated by older individuals who lack both extrinsic and intrinsic incentives for growth. This problem is exacerbated by recent changes in pension entitlement in both the private and public sectors, as a result of which many people are seeing their planned retirement date recede by several years. Like exhausted marathon runners, they find themselves facing another lap just as they thought they were nearing the finishing line. What are the likely consequences, and do they matter? How can older workers be helped to keep on going, growing and contributing?

We describe here briefly a 'typology' of middle and later career which is intended to stimulate discussion of this issue. We believe that organisations' provision for middle and later career, and individuals' own career decisions, need to take account of different motivations typical of this period of career, as well as individuals' widely differing formal and informal career trajectories. Reward, career, training and other HR structures must be shaped in such a way as to ensure that they continue to encourage and support individuals' creative contributions well into late career, and that work remains rewarding for people as long as possible.

The study

Our analysis draws on the results of a study carried out in 2002-04. Our aim was to find out how much career growth occurs in middle and later career, what forms it

takes and in what circumstances it occurs. Each of 41 individuals took part in up to twelve hours of interviews and psychometrics. The intensity of our investigation meant that small numbers were inevitable and, because existing research suggests that the rhythms of women's careers are often different from men's, a choice between men and women was unavoidable. We reluctantly decided in favour of men, largely because of our access to an international aero-engineering organisation where female engineers were scarce. We nevertheless attempted to build some diversity into the sample. It included 24 engineers (roughly equal numbers of managers, professional specialists, and shop-floor craftsmen, technicians and supervisors) and 17 'human development practitioners', who were secondary school teachers and Roman Catholic priests. The engineers saw career in strongly 'linear' (Driver, 1994) terms, i.e. as hierarchical advancement, whereas the human development practitioners tended to define career in terms of serving others' well-being and they professed comparative indifference to formal advancement. We make no pretence that our sample was widely representative. However, we are reassured to note that the analysis we present here is largely consistent with the findings of other studies (eg Bailyn, 1980; Howard & Bray, 1988; Hall & Rabinowitz, 1988) which are larger, or more representative of particular occupations, or both.

Findings

Our results confirmed the importance of both the career plateau and the transition between career growth and career maintenance for understanding patterns of growth in this period of career.

The career plateau

The 'average' man in the study thought he had probably plateaued; advancement continued to have some importance for four men in every ten, but only one in seven was pursuing it at all actively. Men who thought they had plateaued (we used a subjective measure of the desire for, and perceived likelihood of, hierarchical advancement) were less concerned to develop and maintain their expertise. Work had also become less important to them as a source of challenge, learning and self-fulfilment. It would be reassuring to think that their private lives had taken up the slack, but there was no evidence of this: men whose careers had plateaued were no more likely than their non-plateaued peers to report growth in non-work areas of their lives. However, the career plateau was not linked either to productivity or pro-social behaviours in the context of work. As other studies (e.g. Near, 1985) have found, therefore, the plateau did not signify any decline in self-reported performance. Rather, the more likely victims of dwindling opportunities for formal progression were active career maintenance and self-renewal.

Career orientation

A maintenance outlook on career was more common than an expansive and 'growthful' outlook on career. Men who reported the latter – our measure tapped feelings of continuing qualitative momentum in career, regardless of men's plateau status – enjoyed significantly better psychological health than maintainers. (We cannot, of course, be sure of the direction of this relationship.) Strikingly, this intrinsically expansive outlook was also linked to higher levels of self-reported contribution whether productive or pro-social. Men who described their orientation towards career in terms of maintenance, rather than intrinsic advance, not only reported lower levels of actual growth and contribution, they were less concerned to grow and contribute, and less likely to set goals relating to growth or contribution. Thus, whereas Super (Super et al, 1995) portrays career maintenance in moderately favourable terms, the picture of maintenance we uncovered was somewhat more negative, as other investigators (e.g. Williams & Savickas, 1990) have found. The transition from career growth (especially of an intrinsic kind) to career maintenance has considerable importance both for individuals and organisations.

A typology of men in middle and later career

Our model – summarised diagrammatically below – draws on these findings. It is constructed loosely around two broad dimensions. The first (career growth vs career maintenance) has already been discussed; the second – high vs low centrality of career and/or work – refers to patterns of engagement with work which are often entrenched aspects of individual identity, but which we found to be somewhat in flux in our study.

Figure 1: A typology of middle and later career

Self-Actualisers
Career still growing but not central to life.
Want: job content; novelty; challenge; creativity
Fear: boredom, loss of autonomy, personal stagnation

Career-Builders
Career still growing and central to life.
Want: impact; recognition; advancement; challenge
Fear: marginalisation, career stagnation

Coasters
Career no longer growing and not central to life.
Want: security; material comfort; respect for skill/seniority
Fear: premature redundancy

Grafters
Career no longer growing but work central to life.
Want: satisfaction of work; valued contribution; feeling of worth
Fear: burnout, impoverishment of non-work selves

The first quadrant – high growth, low career centrality – refers to a group of men who continued to seek and experience lively growth, but for whom climbing a career ladder was not a prime concern. These individuals described their intolerance of boredom and routine, and a continuing need for tasks and roles which challenged their expertise and creativity. Congenial work content and a sense of autonomy were central to their feelings of well-being. Self-renewal through work was often complemented by well-developed, creative interests outside work. Because of their appetite for learning and discovery, we call this group *Self-Actualisers*, but not without misgivings: self-actualisation often implies egocentricity, but several members of the group clearly valued growth as much because it enhanced their ability to serve others as for its contribution to their own fulfilment. Self-actualisers feared stagnating work content more than the career plateau. Members of this group often appeared naïve or inept in managing their careers and, although far from indifferent to recognition, continued to rely substantially upon interventions by shrewd, imaginative or conscientious sponsors for continuing access to suitable work and career progression.

The second group of men – *Career-Builders* (high in growth, high in career centrality) – differed from the first in their more extrinsic take on career. In this quadrant, career growth was associated strongly with continuing pursuit of formal advancement and other forms of public recognition. These men included self-seeking careerists, as well as individuals for whom the meaning of advancement had mainly to do with public recognition of their competence and contribution, or the enhanced impact it allowed them to have upon their organisation or field. For most, the content of their work mattered less than its visibility and proximity to the organisational or professional mainstream. They were willing to sacrifice a long-cultivated specialism for the sake of advancement and, as shrewd veterans of their organisations' career tournament, were on the lookout for tactical moves which might still bring them long term advantage. This is not to say that members of this group were not also intrinsically motivated, even highly so. Challenge was as important to some as to *Self-Actualisers*, but its meaning was different: it lay less in learning and mastery for their own sake than in demonstrating an ability to function successfully at the highest possible managerial or professional level. Consequently, this was the group to whom plateauing constituted the most serious threat. However, whilst its members were more reluctant than other groups to accept they had plateaued, most were in the process of resigning themselves to it in a realistic and philosophical way. Themes of stress, fatigue and physical or mental ill health were prominent in the interview narratives of this group.

The remaining two quadrants describe individuals for whom career maintenance predominated over growth. *Coasters* comprised a group of men for whom work and career were no longer (if they ever had been) central to their lives. These individuals showed continuing pride in their work, and often prized their status as senior and respected members of their workgroup. They valued work for the contribution it allowed them to make, and for the sense of involvement and the companionship it brought. Above all, perhaps, they were concerned to safeguard the financial and material security at a time when their preparations for retirement were well underway. These men, including some as young as their late 40s, were seeing out their time. Some said they were willing at this stage in career to relinquish demanding roles and revert to junior positions, if they could do so without loss of face. Several had already done so.

Career growth, whether of an intrinsic or extrinsic kind, had also largely faded into the past for the fourth and final group. Unlike the *Coasters*, however, men in this group, whom we call *Grafters*, continued to value work as a centrally important part of their identity. They tended to work long and hard, but not for reasons of advancement or the intrinsic interest of their work. In some cases (primarily among teachers and priests), their dedication reflected commitment to a socially valued cause; in others, it seemed more like ingrained habit, indicative of the satisfaction they gained from the simple fact of working, or their pride in their workmanship. In all cases, it represented a balance each had long since struck between work and non-work aspects of his life. These men were potentially of great value to their organisations, not just because of their hard work and high commitment but also because, unlike colleagues who were still preoccupied with visibility, status, advancement or growth, they were willing to take on important but unattractive and often thankless tasks.

Interestingly, this group contained the least well-adjusted men in our sample. It included more workaholics than any other group. One such – a hippy in his youth who disavowed career ambitions at any stage of his career – probably spoke for others when he said ruefully, 'I didn't understand how work would sneak up and take over my life.' Erikson's (1959) proposition that overwork sometimes reflects feelings of inferiority relative to one's peers seems relevant to several individuals. Some had until recently pursued advancement unremittingly, only to accept finally that their career had long since plateaued. They continued to pour their energies into work in a way which they recognised as pathological. A few were struggling to come to terms with what they saw as the failure of their career; their distress was especially acute where over-commitment to career had also destroyed their marriage and other important relationships. We certainly do not mean to imply that all, or even most, *grafters* were maladjusted; however, more in this group commented unfavourably on the balance between their lives and their work and achieved low scores for psychosocial adjustment than in other groups. Themes of depletion, anxiety and depression were more in evidence in their narratives. Several described themselves as burned out.

Overlap between occupation and career type was limited, although men in managerial roles (regardless of occupation) were more likely among *Career-Builders*, and Works employees among *Coasters*. The four types describe configurations of growth and career/work centrality which may apply to any period of career. This may reflect circumstance as well as disposition – for example, the ambitious single parent in our sample whose career went on hold while he brought up his children, or the bored Works employee who discovered challenge after unexpected promotion. However, what *does* give the model especial significance in this period of career are (i) an accelerating trend for individuals to move from the high-growth to the low-growth quadrants as they plateau and/or move to a maintenance outlook on career; (ii) gradually declining career and work centrality, which we would expect to gather pace as individuals near retirement and (iii) individuals' increased vulnerability to stress, fatigue and depletion. These trends pose a tough career management challenge to both organisations and individuals.

We believe that the model's main value for middle and later career lies in the possibilities it suggests for matching career interventions to individual need. For example, whereas *Coasters* require interventions such as performance management and exit strategies, *Grafters* require strategies for managing self-worth, renewal and overwork. Thus, whilst few of the latter described growth activities which they had initiated spontaneously, most nevertheless welcomed the stimulus and learning which they said had occurred when they were required e.g. to rotate between jobs, take on new tasks, or teach a new subject. *Self-actualisers* require technical challenge and flexibility for shaping job content to reflect their emerging interests; their career ineptitude suggests the continuing importance of managed interventions for optimising their contribution to the organisation and their own fulfilment. *Career-builders* require progression, job rotation, timely and honest feedback concerning their prospects, and guidance concerning career options which may facilitate continued advancement. Where advancement opportunities are blocked, organisations need to provide long salary scales (Hall& Rabinowitz, 1988), which allow continued salary progression and recognition of continuing contribution when advancement is no longer possible. The sabbatical or secondment which may help to revive a flagging *Grafter* is unlikely to appeal to the *Career-Builder*, for whom continuing visibility is especially crucial when time for advancement is running out. Similarly, stepping down into a less demanding role may be a strategy for managing stress/depletion which is better suited to *Self-Actualisers/Grafters* than *Career-Builders*. And so on. This points to a central purpose of the model: helping people and organisations to target career interventions in more differentiated, and hence more appropriate ways.

Our model has limitations which reflect its sample base. It is unlikely to apply as well to women as to men, and among men it may apply better to some than others. For example, partly different considerations would be relevant to the many individuals whose work is better described as a 'job' than a 'career'. Further research is needed. However, our broad dimensions of career growth and career/work centrality seem to us intuitively to have potential relevance to the many individuals who continue to have careers, regardless of occupation and whether their career is of the self-managed and protean (Hall & Mirvis, 1995), or more conventional, kind.

Acknowledgement

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