Retraining, Re-Entering, Rethinking: Career Guidance for Older Workers

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The 2007 study by NICEC for CEDEFOP, Career Development at work – a review of career guidance to support people in employment, reported few examples of provision particularly targeted at employed people over the age of 50, although many services that are expressly for senior management, and many others offering outplacement advice, do see and help people in that age group. Other national and European studies (DfES, 2003 as an example of the former; Clayton et al., 2007 of the latter) suggest there are good services specially dedicated to unemployed older people. But older adults in the context of unemployment are regarded as a group with particular problems. The idea that people over 50 in employment might have rather different, but perfectly normal, needs in making plans about training and career progression, or making changes to have a more fulfilling balance between paid and unpaid work, has not been addressed until recently.

In this paper I explore what is known from existing research on two dimensions of this question of career guidance for older workers, namely what kind of work older people want, and what kind of guidance they would like.

Existing research

I have drawn on UK and European sources, as well as some from further afield, and it may be helpful briefly to describe its scope. In 2002, a UK government-funded project collected qualitative data in England from around 200 individuals and from 63 agencies that provided guidance to older adults, including many that specialised in that target group (DfES, *op. cit.*). This and other data has formed the basis of a series of policy-focused reports from The Age Employment Network, the International Centre for Guidance Studies, the Centre for Research into the Older Workforce and Age Concern (for example, Ford, 2005; Ford, et al., 2007; Grattan, 2006; TAEN, 2007b; Collins, 2006). In the UK there is a renewed policy interest in these issues (for example, HM Government, 2005) and academic research centres in the UK are exploring different aspects of this field (such as the Senior Studies Institute at the University of Strathclyde). The Older and Bolder programme, based at the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education, has published a considerable literature on the closely related field of learning in later life which has provided some illuminating concepts (for example, Soulsby, 2004, on the significance of life stage rather than chronological age).

The most detailed research into career guidance policy at a European level derives from the systematic studies of guidance provision in all the member states (within a wider group of countries) carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (the OECD), the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Education (CEDEFOP), the World Bank and the European Training Foundation (the policy lessons of this are presented in OECD, 2004). Sultana (2004), summarising report on the European countries, confirms that the fieldwork, mostly conducted in 2002, showed a real gap in provision for this age group.

More recently a Leonardo da Vinci project on Third Age Guidance involving partners in twelve different member states put together a range of programmes to help older workers, collecting information on different methods of vocational guidance to help different kinds of older people. This has resulted in a good practice guide (Ford and Clayton, 2007) and associated collection of essays (Clayton *et al.*, 2007) on career guidance support for older adults. Other papers from this project are available from its website, www.gla.ac.uk/tag.

Older workers in the labour market: why do we need them?

There are two responses to this question: demography and skills.

The European Commission distinguishes between three kinds of older people: older workers (aged 55-64); the elderly (aged between 65 and 79); and the very elderly (people over 80). The baby boom generation, born just after the Second World War, are now in the older worker category, and entered it just as the supply of younger people in some countries in the Union began to drop as a result of falling birth rates. As that baby boom generation moves into the elderly group, and then become very elderly, taxation revenue from the generation that will then move into the 'older worker' group will be needed to support this changed demographic. This is predicted to happen around 2030 (European Commission Green Paper, 2005). There seems to be some progress towards this goal of encouraging over 50s to stay in work. Although there is

concern about meeting the Lisbon targets more generally, there is some optimism that the employment target for the older worker group, of 50% by 2010, may be achieved. It is rising, and the figure for 2006 was given as 43.6% (European Commission, 2006). The average exit age from the European labour market also seems to have been creeping up slowly to now nearly 61, so any advance on this would help towards Lisbon goals.

One might suppose that increased immigration would offset the falling birth rate and so reduce the need to keep over 50s in the labour market. This possibility is discussed in the 2005 green paper (*op.cit*), but it also points out that the strategic use of immigration for this purpose has other implications for pressure on services and social cohesion and this needs further debate. Nor is it clear the amount of inward migration to Europe as a whole that would offset the need for people over 50 to stay in the labour market for longer. Figures for some individual countries are available, but the pattern varies greatly between countries.

The financial charge on governments resulting from a larger proportion of older people in the population has at least two aspects. These demographic predictions are making some member states decide to raise the age at which you can draw a pension (this is true of the UK – see Ford, 2006), with the double advantage of increasing the period over which individuals contribute to their own, and others' pensions, and decreasing the period over which it will be paid. At an individual level, of course, the state pension age (SPA) is not necessarily the age at which people leave the labour market: many older people who are on minimal state pensions want and need to continue working after the official retirement age. This is also true of people who believed their (private) personal pension schemes would be enough, but when the time comes they find they are not. Both the extended period before the SPA, and the need to work after it, have implications for the career guidance needs of older people.

The rising cost of health care is a key issue. The figures are again confusing: in the UK there has been concern about a rise in numbers of people drawing disability benefit who are over 50, which in the case of men is still a full 15 years before the SPA. This makes it difficult to know the extent to which individuals are in, or feel themselves to have left the labour market (TAEN, 2007). Some at least of these would be able to work and would like to do so but do not know how to go about getting training or work. The government would like to get them back to work and off benefits. Linked to this is the suggestion that work, whether or not it is paid, is actually good for you: the cost of healthcare, and care for the elderly, is reduced if people remain active as long as they can – though not necessarily wage-earning. I will come back to voluntary work.

The skills and knowledge of older workers is also a complex area. On the one hand, it is important to encourage some older people to stay in the labour market because of their skills. But, taking this group as a whole, people with fewer qualifications are disproportionately found among older workers. This compounds their disadvantage in the labour market as they are more likely to be displaced by structural changes in the economy. But it is not easy to judge the extent of this because older workers are less likely to have formal qualifications for the skills that they possess. This has implications for the kind of guidance any individual may need, and should include how to get accreditation for existing skills. The picture is complex and varies between sectors and skill level. In some sectors, at some levels, the skills and knowledge of older workers are real assets. Some businesses are realising this and looking at ways of retaining these skills (TAEN, 2007b). In other sectors or levels the skills of some workers become obsolete, and the challenge for older people who want to stay in the labour market is to acquire new skills, to make job changes or even change sector.

Unfortunately it is often not easy for them to get training: participation rates in skills training in the UK for older workers are lower than for any other group (Owen-Hussey, *et al.*, 2006). This is partly because some employers do not want to invest in older people, partly that some older people themselves lack the confidence or knowledge of what is available to put themselves forward for it. Again, there are implications for guidance here, in relation to the need for advocacy with employers and confidence building for clients.

Barriers to employment for older people

In society at large, and therefore also among many employers, there are a number of beliefs about the capabilities of older people. In the UK there are famously positive employers who purposely recruit older workers and declare this as a strength (B&Q is a chain of hardware stores which does this), and TAEN (2007b) refers to interesting examples from Finland. But that does not reflect the wider reality among most companies. This particularly affects people with lower levels of qualification. Again some sectors are worse affected than others. The problem is made worse by the fact that many older people believe employers will be biased against them even where they are not (DfES, 2003; Ford *et al.,* 2007). This reflexivity is found in other areas. Employers may believe that older people will have or develop a health condition or disability, and some of course do. But this may not be a reason for stopping work. It may be possible to find other work in the same company which uses the person's skills but is less physically demanding. And it is not just employers who need to think more flexibly about this, but the older workers themselves. Also, older workers themselves need to be more assertive about retraining. Where a place cannot be found by the original employer, it may be necessary to change job or change sector. Here, lack of work experience is a real problem for older people as most existing schemes for work trials are targeted at the young. More generally, lack of confidence is widespread among older people seeking employment at all levels.

Caring responsibilities are also a barrier for older people in returning to work. As people move past 50, they are less likely to be responsible for young children of their own, but increasingly more likely to have caring responsibilities for ageing family members or partners, and a significant number are responsible for grandchildren to enable their adult children to go out to work. Some may want to make use of workplace crèches, and others will need to find part-time or flexible work to fit around elder care arrangements. Lack of understanding about this problem and its possible solutions, both by employers and older people, can constitute a barrier.

Lack of advice, or lack of what is seen as being appropriate advice, is another barrier. This emerged strongly from the UK study in 2002 (DfES, 2003) and was confirmed by a more recent smaller study of older people (Collins, 2006). In the past we have tended to distinguish between services for young people, on the one hand, and services for adults on the other, and assume that all adults feel themselves to be in a single group. The Challenging Age data showed that people were much happier with services where they felt the staff truly understood their situation as an older adult, and did not treat them like younger adults. Some even preferred to have older advisers. The New Zealand study too found that this was particularly important to older service users (New Zealand Department of Labour, 2006). This is not to say that other services are not just as good: some of the perceptions about how suitable a service is for older users come from fears and lack of confidence on the part of those users rather than from actual shortcomings. But these fears shape patterns of use, and specific training in working with older people, special marketing and presentation are very important.

Career goals

The challenge in tackling stereotypes about any group disadvantaged in the labour market is to understand and clarify the issues that may affect older people, without strengthening any prejudices by implying that they do. It should be emphasised that no one applies to all people in this age group, and that they need not be a problem anyway if older workers can find the right jobs. Where age management at work is effective, older people can be a particularly reliable and valuable addition to the workplace. This said, there are yet more ways, both social and psychological, in which individuals over 50 vary from each other.

1. Rate of ageing. Some people feel old at 45, some do not feel old at 90. Prejudice about older workers starts as early as 40 in some sectors, and for this reason there is always a debate about research on older workers should draw the line. Many projects have focussed on 45 plus for this reason. 'Stage' is clearly a more realistic way of considering these changes (Soulsby, 2004) but not so easily quantifiable.

2. Values and expectations for life in older age. This also has cultural and individual dimensions. The Icelandic report from the Leonardo study said that in Iceland, 'a busy man is a noble man' (Third Age Guidance project reports, 2007). There they are trying hard to reduce an overall unemployment rate of around 2 % (compared to the European average of nearly 7% – 5.5% in the UK). Where a culture prizes work to this extent, the difficulty for an individual may be to retire rather than to stay in work.

3. Attitudes to voluntary work. Paid work is not the only option, but some societies value voluntary work more than others. Unpaid work contributes greatly to the economy as a whole, if not to domestic income, and fulfils many of the needs that people seek from work. It is also a good way for job seekers to get work experience in a new occupational sector.

4. Gender differences. Kidd (2006) points out that women's careers are more variable than men's and increasingly so: they experience a range of diverse and often discontinuous career patterns. As she says, the female workforce is polarised: childless women and full-time employed mothers working in relatively high-status, well-paid jobs are at one extreme, and mothers in low-status, badly-paid jobs are at the other. Women are more likely than men to interrupt their careers. She agrees with Soulsby (2004) that it would be more helpful to view life course in terms of periods of transition and learning rather than age-related stages of development, which would make it easier to compare their careers with men's. She does not write about age specifically, but among some groups of older women workers, it is possible that women who have taken a career break to care for families may wish to work beyond SPA (which may also apply to men who had been out of the labour market for a while). Women may also be particularly affected by caring responsibilities. Collins (2006) found that the women in her study felt they experienced particular disadvantages, some relating to a lack of understanding by employers of the physical problems associated with the relatively short period during the menopause but contributing to a stereotype.

While we cannot generalise, we can look for patterns of what different groups may want, both in relation to work and in relation to guidance in finding or keeping it. Much of what we know about what older people what comes from studies on *unemployed* older people who want to work again. The New Zealand Government's study acknowledges the occupational and social differences described above, but suggests that a more helpful distinction between individuals may be whether or not work is key, either to their financial well-being or to their emotional well-being. If it is key to both, they will be highly motivated to get back into the labour market, if key to financial but not to emotional wellbeing, then it will be

harder to help them. In the New Zealand context characteristics associated with the more motivated included being male, being at the younger end of the age group (between 45 and 54), and having higher educational qualifications. However, this does not mean that others do not want, or need, to get work. Voluntary work may be seen as very relevant to those in the upper right-hand sector of the diagram above.

Career guidance for older adults

Variations between individuals over 50 indicates that career advice for this group should offer support for any of the following employment goals**:**

i. re-entering the labour market after a short or long break, perhaps, but also perhaps not in the same kind of work, or the same level of activity as in their last job

ii. staying in the labour market, also with possible alternatives:
   - in the same job
   - at the same level, but with a job change
   - going for promotion which might involve more training

iii. strategic reduction of workload:
   - perhaps thinking about winding down towards retirement
   - perhaps wanting to carry on working, but for health or strength or caring reasons needing to reduce it.

Any of these first three goals may require advocacy work with employers.

iv. A complete change. Some need to reduce their work load but cannot do so in their present job or even present sector
   - this may mean retraining, which as shown can be difficult. Also, some employers are reluctant to take on someone changing sector who is older than other staff but less experienced
   - some people want now to follow a dream with a complete job change and do something they have always wanted to do (Arthur, et al., 1999). This may take the form of self-employment, but they will need good sources of advice and support in getting started (TAG, 2007).

What sort of guidance do older people want? The Age Employment Network (www.taen.org.uk) in the UK is developing a ten-point policy manifesto on guidance for older people. As well as the features of good careers advice needed by all age groups, we know from research (DfES, 2003; Ford et al., 2007; Collins, 2006) shows that older adults need:

- advisers trained to be aware of, and sympathetic to the needs of older people, as described above
- an option of face-to-face as well as electronic and telephone guidance. UK research (Hawthorn, in preparation) suggests that while there are many 'silver surfers' are happy to use distant guidance, others are less likely to do so
- time to tell their story
- respect and encouragement to combat diminishing self-esteem and loss of motivation
- the chance to see an adviser over a period of time
- help in accessing work experience training
- access to specialist information about different sectors
- good referral between sources of help relevant to older people including financial advice
- accreditation of existing skills
- support for self-advocacy, as well as advocacy by the adviser, with employers and training providers. This should include campaigns to help change opinion, as well as help in individual cases. It could involve encouraging groups of older adults to support each other and campaign together
- information on equal opportunity and pension legislation, and any special programmes targeted at older workers by government and other providers.

Currently most careers advice for older workers is available outside the workplace. This includes some specialist services for older workers, although these are often victims of short-term funding and there is a policy trend now in the UK towards funding services for all users (DIUS and DWP, 2007) and then focusing delivery for specific target groups as needed.

In response to this some general guidance services have also addressed the needs of older workers. These include publicly-funded, independent and voluntary (third) sector ones. The former group includes the public employment services, which are usually the main source of help for all adults, and are where people can find out about the many special government programmes aimed at older workers. However, they are often also driven by government targets to get people into any work at the expense of those individuals' longer-term goals. The 2003 UK research (DfES), confirmed by Collins (2006) found many older adults were unhappy with the service they received at government Jobcentres where staff may not have enough time to give the help that many older users need. To some extent this is also true of other government-funded services (in the UK, the *nextstep* service caters for people with qualifications below level 2, that of secondary school leavers), but individual centres have been able to introduce special programmes for older clients. The *learndirect Advice* telephone line and web-based system is now

promoting itself clearly to older users with a campaign 'Working life begins at 50' (www.learndirect-advice.co.uk), backed up by comprehensive web resources at www.fiftyforward.co.uk.

There are some independent specialist third-age agencies and, as stated, many of the private career advice and agencies and redundancy advisers work with senior or older employees, so are seeing many over 50s. The voluntary sector is active in community-based provision for unemployed people, including older adults. Courses for older adults thinking about job change are popular and effective especially when combined with one-to-one guidance over the period of the course (Clayton et al., 2007). Besides the chance for assessment and information, one of their greatest strengths is the opportunity to build friendships and networks with other people in similar circumstances.

Within the workplace career guidance is available in-house in some larger companies, where the business case has been made both for guidance, and for the benefit of retaining older staff. As we found in the recent study on workplace guidance generally (Jackson, 2008), however, these tend to favour higher qualified employees. Trade Unions have an important role in reaching employees who do not fall in those favoured groups. In the UK unions have been active in developing workplace signposting, if not full guidance, through the Trades Union Congress' Union Learning Representative system and this has involved many people over 50 (for information on this, see the Unionlearn 'Supporting Learning' webpage www.unionlearn.org.uk/advice/index.cfm and Haughton, 2008). The Age Employment Network has published a good practice guide for Human Resource departments (TAEN, 2007).

Sector-specific agencies are playing an increasingly important part in career guidance for people in employment, those in sectors where early exit is normal are more likely to have programmes to advise older adults. Examples from the UK where this has happened include the armed forces and the fire service, both of which have active re-employment agencies with training advice.

What is still needed?

Policy statements at national and European level commonly include reference to the importance of retaining over 50s in the labour market. What is needed now are initiatives from government and from employers to turn this into a reality. At a European level, clear guidelines similar to those developed by The Age Employment Network on what is needed by older adults, could disseminate these ideas. Government incentives could encourage employers of all sizes to consider the career development needs of their older workforce. Public funding for adult external guidance services could be made conditional on services meeting the needs of older adults. As well as guidance services in the workplace and outside it, many older adults need longer programmes of coaching in jobsearch and career planning skills. These could be developed by colleges and training providers. Research has shown that these services are wanted by adults and are effective when provided. They need now to be transferred from the transitory project funding where they have hitherto been located and incorporated into mainstream provision.

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