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Overview of this issue

Welcome to the Journal of the National Institute of Career Education and Counselling. In this edition established academics, new writers and practitioner researchers bring us useful insights into career learning and the interplay between theory, practice and research. The UK government's recent career strategy placed renewed emphasis on career learning in schools in England making it a highly topical subject for consideration. However, career covers all stages of life and needs to be supported by a life-long engagement with learning, hence the articles extend beyond the school setting. Our authors reflect on programme design, review the development and implementation of career learning frameworks and tools, and explore external and internal contextual factors that influence the career learning process. Whilst different in focus and context, at the core of all the articles is the theme of client and participant career learning leading to progression in career development.

A particular landmark for NICEC is the publication of an article by **Laura Walker** which was awarded the Bill Law Student Memorial Award 2019. In this opening piece, Laura explores the implications for career guidance practice of late career decision making, where she characterises the learning as a process of discovering more of themselves – 'more of me'. The findings are set out using a visual which is unique to the author and very helpful for use by practitioners. The image of 'dancing with fear' is powerful, and reminiscent of Bill Law's use of imagery in his concern to help practitioners to apply the lessons learned through research to practice.

In the two articles that follow, **Lis McGuire** and **John Gough** write from different perspectives about the process of designing learning experiences. Liz explores adopting a collaborative approach between the provider and the user of services. Although the article focuses on addressing the needs of persons with mental health problems, her findings and reflections are equally relevant to programme design for other user groups. Similarly, John's reflections on a collaborative process in training careers leaders in England highlights the importance of engaging the voice of the learner in enabling them to develop this role effectively in complex and demanding educational environments.

The next three articles focus on specific aspects of working directly with clients, and present new career learning tools and a career framework. These developments, rooted in practice, include a mix of 'what works' along with reflection on what was less successful, and insights into why that might be. First, **Katie Dallison** describes the development and implementation of Plan: Me. Piloted within higher education, this tool takes a holistic approach to career decision making, integrating goal setting, and allowing clients to map out a process of how they can move themselves forward independently. Second, we have an article by **Keren Coney and Ben Simkins** in which they consider the potential of using 'screencasting' technology to support students' C.V. writing. Third, **Lewis Clark and Carolyn Parry** review their creation of the INSPiRED teenager framework designed to support collaborative career-based learning between parents/carers and their teenage child.

The final two articles are concerned with the wider context within which career learning takes place. **Szilvia Schmitsek** explores the educational experiences of young people in England, Denmark and Hungary who had been at risk of dropping out, but later gained a qualification at a second chance provision. In contrast, **Nikki Storey** is concerned with the influences on the career beliefs of students in an ethnically diverse state school in London. Using an adapted short version of the 'Careers Beliefs Patterns Scale', Nikki examines the interlinked impacts of ethnicity and socio-economic status, and draws out recommendations for practitioners.

Lyn Barham & Michelle Stewart, Editors

Mid-life career reinvention: Dancing with fear and confidence

Laura Walker

Most of us will be living and working longer, but what if we want something very different for the later chapters of our working lives? Research suggests workers in late career face unique career and psychosocial issues but there is little empirical research to help individuals and the coach practitioners who work with them.

In this grounded theory study, three main features of late career reinvention coaching emerged and form the basis of a new practitioner model: discovering – journeying to be more of me; systemic readiness; and dancing with fear and confidence. Key implications for practitioners are highlighted.

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Research context

Longer working lives

Economists and psychologists are reporting that the '100 year life' is already upon us, bringing a whole range of challenges and opportunities resulting from longer working lives (Gratton & Scott, 2016). In the UK, 36% of the working population are over 50, 54% of workers aged 55 are planning to work beyond state pension age (CIPD, 2012) and 25% of those who have retired have gone on to 'unretire' (Platts, Corna, Worts & McDonough, 2017). Government and industry bodies argue that older workers are vital for the future of the economy and are critical to addressing a predicted 7.5 million skills gap, improving productivity and reducing costs (CIPD, 2012; BITC, 2016, 2017; DWP, 2017). However, whilst more and more people have a desire or a need to work into their 60s and 70s, employment seems not to be suitable for many people over 50 and some assert that real change is needed to address age bias and discrimination as well as retention, re-training and recruitment practices (BITC, 2017).

Most writers emphasise the opportunity of extended working lives for individuals and organisations but others are starting to debate potential inequality issues and whether working longer will accentuate cumulative advantage and disadvantage. Guy Standing explored the concept of 'The Precariat' in 2011 suggesting that older people are increasingly joining 'The Precariat', by taking low-level jobs to supplement dwindling pension incomes (Standing, 2011). A recent study into the lived experience of precarity further argues that 'many older workers, not just those in precarious jobs, feel a sense of ontological precarity influenced by the intersection between precarious jobs, welfare states and households' (Lain, Airey, Loretto, & Vickerstaff, 2018, p.1).

Late career / mid-life

Within the growing careers and public policy literature, 'late career' generally includes people who are at least 45 years old and not ready to retire. Many writers assert that this stage has some distinctive needs and challenges, arguing that individuals in late career place greater emphasis on creating work and family balance (Baltes, 1980; Barham, 2008), the desire for better work climate, autonomy and finding meaning (Wang, Olsen & Shulz, 2013; Erodogan, Bauer, Peiró &Truxillo, 2011; Brown, 2015).

Conversely, other researchers emphasise the diverse characteristics of older workers citing very 'different circumstances, needs and preoccupations' (Watts, McNair, Robey, Berry & Sterland, 2015, p.9). Furthermore, some do not consider it to be a discreet stage as the priorities, challenges and self-confidence of people aged 50 are affected by the accumulated choices, successes, and experiences earlier in their life (Feldman, 2002).

Life stage theorists have long argued that this age range is associated with changing psychological needs.

For example, Levinson's eight life-stages theory includes a 'mid-life transition' stage from age 40 to 45 and a 'questioning and modification' stage from age 50 to 55 (Levinson, 1978). It is also worth noting that since 1978 the average life expectancy in the UK has increased by almost eight years, so these age ranges may have shifted (ONS, 2019).

For this research, 'late career' is considered to be the point after which individuals themselves believe they are moving into the final chapter(s) of their working lives. In practice, there was an association with age in line with other studies, all were over 45 and considered themselves to be in mid-life.

Reinvention

Job change in late career is quite common with around half the workforce changing, particularly women. Importantly, the experience of changing work in later career is reported to be quite polarised with a more positive experience for those with higher qualifications, higher incomes, and in professional and managerial occupations (McNair, Owen, Flynn, Humphrey & Woodfield 2004; McNair, 2011).

For a significant career change or transition, writers use a variety of terms such as 're-imagining' (Burns, 2015), 're-inventing' (Ibarra, 2004), 're-crafting' (Mintzberg, 1987), 're-orienting' (Bridges, 2004), 're-framing' (Brown, 2015), or 'renewing' (Wang, Olsen & Shulz, 2013). They consistently argue for a psychological transition that goes beyond or alongside responses to external changes, and frequently reference Bridges' three-stage transition model (Bridges, 1980).

For this study, 'late career reinvention' was chosen as it succinctly describes the topic without being too prescriptive or familiar to participants.

Career coaching

Career coaching is a relatively new discipline and has only really been recognised for about twenty years. Whilst there is no common definition (Hazen & Steckler, 2014; Parker, 2017; Yates, 2014), Yates distinguishes career counselling from career coaching by suggesting that counselling 'infers a particular style of support that might help clients to resolve conflicts or understand patterns of behaviour', whereas career coaching is 'seen as a practice that can benefit all, not just those who are struggling, and is a mechanism to help people who are doing well' (Yates, 2014, p.3).

Career theories do feature in many career coaching chapters but as Parker points out there is no empirical evidence linking recent theories such as 'boundaryless careers' (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) with coaching outcomes. There is virtually nothing written specifically about late career reinvention coaching beyond mentions that mid-life can be a key stage for transition (Parker, 2017; Yates, 2014).

For the purpose of this research, it was not assumed that coaching during late career reinvention is necessarily career coaching, but rather might involve a variety of different approaches.

Grounded theory findings

A qualitative and inductive research strategy using grounded theory methodology (GTM) was chosen to reflect the absence of existing coaching research in this area, enable conceptualisation (of the most important features) and support theory building (to develop a framework for coaches). There were 14 participants - 7 were individuals (clients) who had reinvented their late career and 7 were coaches with extensive experience of coaching others through late career reinvention (with several hundred clients between them). All participants took part voluntarily, were in work, and part of an extended professional business network. Efforts were made to ensure a mix of gender but in practice there were more females than males (5:2 for both groups). Individual, semi-structured telephone interviews were used, and appropriate measures were taken to ensure participants knew what to expect and to provide confidentiality and anonymity. Data analysis involved the three levels of coding typical of GTM.

Overall

According to the participants, late career reinvention is a journey that takes time (between three and eight years), is non-linear, brings big questions as well as practical challenges, and is only recognised as reinvention in hindsight.

Three main features of coaching during late career reinvention:

- Discovering - journeying to become more of me
- Systemic readiness
- Dancing without fear

These features were common to both groups (clients and coaches) but with some differences in perspective or emphasis. In this section, key concepts that emerged from the data are shown as subheadings. The quotes are original data from the interviews.

Discovering – journeying to become more of me

As clients work on the issue that brought them to coaching, they are discovering as opposed to just exploring or deciding. The initial issue is rarely the full scope of the work. It is a multi-layered, non-linear process with people who are far from blank pages (at this stage of their career and their lives). Rather than hoping to become someone they are not, or deciding between different options, they are wanting to be more of themselves – 'more of me'. They may be interested in other reinvention stories, but this is more about validating their own journey than wanting to replicate others.

The coaching is in service of this 'dis-covering' by helping and stimulating clients to think holistically and differently about themselves, supporting fresh insights or perspectives and helping them go beyond their immediate symptoms.

> 'The journey was all an excuse just for me to be who I was meant to be.'

> 'The initial symptoms will show up in the context of the work, but they also tend to be asking questions across the spectrum of their lives.'

A compass metaphor symbolises the need to navigate multi-layered conversations covering four different aspects of self-discovery (four poles)

Figure 1: Discovering compass
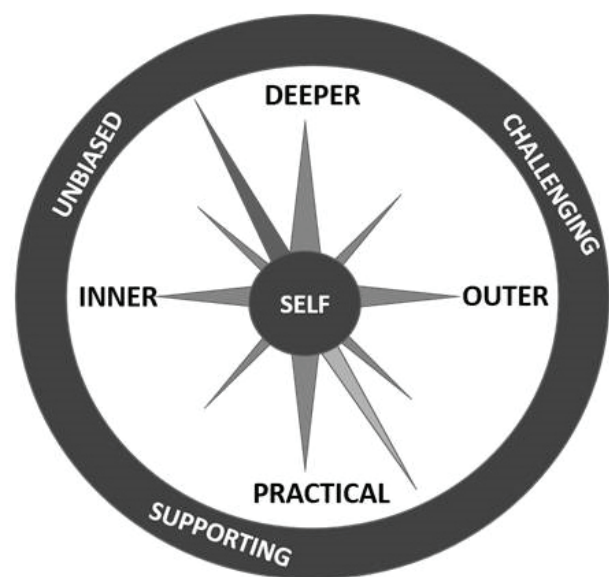
- 'Deeper self' - e.g. Who am I now? What is my purpose? What matters most?
- 'Practical self' - e.g. Am I financially ok to do this? What new skills will I need? How can I build my network or CV?
- 'Inner self' - e.g. What are my values? What is my body / unconscious telling me matters? Are my repeating patterns or beliefs getting in the way?
- 'Outer self' - e.g. Will others see me as odd? What can I learn from others? How do others see what I bring? What are the risks to my wider family?

The unique value of the coach relationship was reported to be as a companion who is an 'unbiased, challenging supporter'. During the journey, clients may have other companions such as partners, friends, or colleagues but they are not considered to be unbiased for a whole variety of reasons. The client seems to

Articles

be the prime navigator – they are the one journeying, are present for the whole journey and ultimately make the choices. The coach has a role in assisting the navigation prompting further discovery in appropriate ways or ensuring major aspects of the journeying process are not missed.

> 'It was about having someone who would approach it professionally, that I could trust, and know that it was my decision.'

> 'It's probably the only space where they give themselves permission to speak freely because their partners would probably have a fit as there might be a lot of money coming in – big holidays, big houses, big cars.'

Systemic readiness

'Systemic readiness' refers to aspects about the individual or their wider system that can affect their readiness, willingness, or ability to reinvent their late career. The data showed it was most relevant at the start and end and there was a sense of a boundary to cross. There can be a wide range of influences that can be present both in terms of risk and a felt sense of readiness – hence the notion of systemic as opposed to individual readiness or alignment.
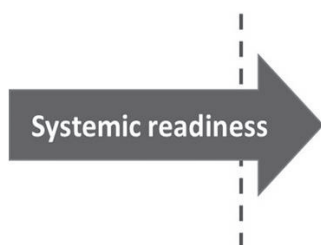

Figure 2: Systemic readiness and emotional boundary

Individuals seemed to feel its importance more emotionally and described the necessity to take a jump or a leap of faith. Coaches stressed the importance of paying attention to the whole system and addressing the risks to that system, potentially a more detached position.

'Sufficient dissatisfaction' was a precursor to readiness. For some, dissatisfaction grew gradually (a slow burn) but for others it was triggered by an event or circumstances. It also seemed to influence what people pay attention to. Clients initially found it

easier to know what they didn't want or what was missing as opposed to what they did want or need. Interestingly, no one suggested that they were satisfied after the reinvention – proud, liberated, lighter, looking toward the next change – but not satisfied. Coaches also described some clients who reappraised their dissatisfaction through coaching and deliberately chose their current path – so not to reinvent.

> 'I was doing too much and getting very, very dissatisfied.'

> 'They typically find it easier to answer a question like - what do you definitely not want from your next role?'

> 'I'd say about 30% go down a very different route. Some say things like 'I needed to pause and then choose from a more conscious place' as opposed to just following some kind of formula.'

A further consideration was whether their '*basic needs*' would continue to be met. Whilst these varied according to individual circumstances, the dominant need seemed to be financial security with both coaches and individuals referencing it extensively.

> 'I did have to do a lot of weighing up with my coach to do that - I was leaving 18 years of stability, pension, bonus and all that security.'

The views and expectations of others can also be powerful, especially those close to the client. This influence can be conscious or unconscious, visible or hidden. A key question was 'is everyone ready enough?' which serves as a reminder to pay attention to wider influences whilst also acknowledging different possibilities of 'enough'.

Dancing with fear and confidence

The third main feature that emerged was an interplay between fear and confidence that is both 'dynamic and changing'. The relationship is dynamic in that they can grow and decline at different paces and both can be a driver (affect) as well as a response (effect). It may be helpful to consider the metaphor of a dance between two partners – but where the leader of the dance can switch, the type of dance can change, and they can also dance individually while the other watches in the background.

'It's terrifying and exciting at the same time and I'm still thinking how the hell am I going to pay my gas bill?'

Initial fears included fear of being irrelevant, becoming my parents, being useless, or being stuck forever. Later fears might be fear of making the wrong decision, being in limbo, not being good enough, being vulnerable, uncertainty, changing, not changing, or not being able to pay my bills.

'Is it too late, am I too old, has the ship sailed? I haven't done anything that makes a real difference yet.'

'Later there can be the fear of will I be good enough, everyone else is already qualified - they've been doing it for years, will anybody want me?'

Confidence was also reported to be dynamic in nature - varying by individual and over time. There was a suggestion by some coaches that confidence might be more of an issue for women and where the change is forced, but this was beyond the scope of this study.

'There is a lot of confidence building - which I do get in all the coaching, but it is really common in a redundancy situation – building self-esteem back up first of all before they can even think about being capable of something else.'

It was anticipated that emotions might be an important part of late career reinvention and this is consistent with the wider literature on transitions. The prevalence of fear and self-confidence, and indeed an interplay between them, was not expected until it emerged from the data.

One participant captured the experience in this metaphor:

'It's like being a hermit crab which needs to move into a larger shell. There's the part where you take a deep breath and emerge, you're really vulnerable, then you scuttle into the new shell and stretch out. It's about having to let go. Then you realise it doesn't stop - you know you can stay in the shell for a time but there will be a call to shift out of it again'.

Integrating the findings into a practitioner model

The three main features are clearly shown in figure 3. 'Discovering - journeying to be more of myself' is

Figure 3: 'The discovering model'
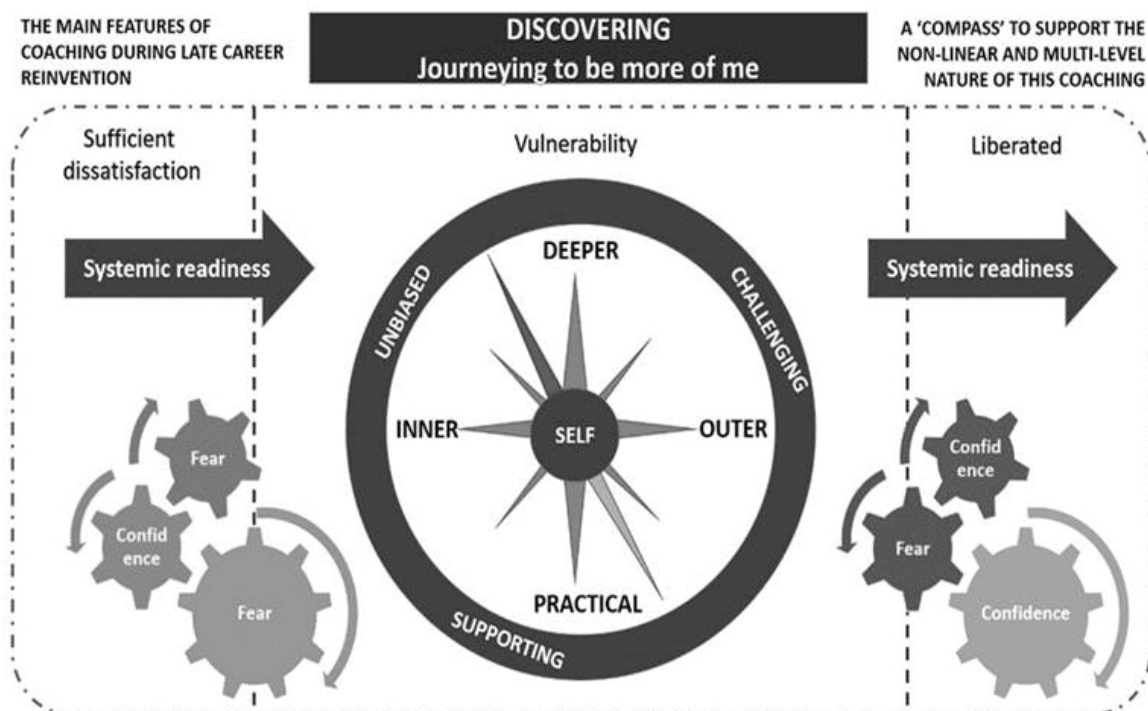
the over-arching theme. The compass illustrates the multi-layered conversations and the preferred coach role. 'Systemic readiness' particularly features at the start and end of coaching, with individuals considering a whole range of conscious and unconscious factors. 'Dancing with fear and confidence' is a feature throughout the whole journey. The different gears symbolise the changing types as well as their influence on the pace of reinvention (accelerating, decelerating, freezing). The emotional states across the top are an example of the internal psychological transition that can be involved.

Key practitioner implications

Four potential implications for practice are highlighted.

Discovering (as opposed to exploring or deciding)

Participants observed that coaching with the aim of discovering involves a different approach. 'Dis-covering' involves uncovering things that were previously not seen or understood, present but may not be presenting. There might be reasons (conscious or unconscious) as to why things were covered and coach participants emphasised the need to be respectful, aware of your own 'stuff', and alert to potential risks.

The concept of decision-making has been dominant in careers literature for a long time. In the context of this research, decision-making was not a key feature and both coach and client participants warned against focusing on one decision or solution too soon. Several coach participants suggested that coaching approaches which worked with the whole person and helped them to 'get out of their heads' were particularly useful and recommended developmental, existential, ontological or person-centred coaching approaches.

Unbiased, challenging supporter

Clients really valued this lack of bias and believed that most, if not all, of the other people around them were biased in some way. For many coaches, working with clients who are wanting to make a change can be inspirational and interesting both personally and professionally. Several coach participants acknowledged this interest may challenge the 'unbiased' aspect with a potential risk of encouraging reinvention. They addressed this risk through effective supervision.

Holding a 'challenging supporter' position when coaching may itself be tricky. In his work, de Haan described a 'playing field of coaching approaches' along two continua producing four quadrants (de Haan, 2008):

- Suggesting ---- Exploring
- Confronting ---- Supporting

This research suggests coaches may need to occupy or move between both ends of de Haan's confronting - supporting continuum in order to be a challenging supporter. Yates argues that whilst 'coaching practitioners would tend to resist the suggesting / confronting quadrant', challenging can be an important part of career coaching if done, for example, from a position of unconditional positive regard (Yates, 2014, p.1).

Navigating wide ranging conversations

The findings showed a wide variety of coaching topics and the compass could help to navigate these. For example, during contracting coaches could use it to be explicit about their approach and any associated boundaries. Alternatively, it could highlight aspects that may or may not have been discussed yet.

A future development of the compass could be to support coaches in their choice of approach for different types of conversation. For example, an 'inner-self' conversation may benefit from a values identification tool or a 'practical-self' conversation may involve signposting resources which might be helpful. Additionally, for an 'outer-self' conversation a system mapping exercise could assist them or for 'deeper-self' conversations, existential approaches may be appropriate.

Position and proximity to dancing with fear and confidence

A varied and dynamic interplay between fear and confidence emerged from this study quickly and consistently. According to participants, the coach needs to be able to clearly and respectfully reflect aspects of the dance (including possible patterns) back to the client by sharing what they notice in ways that provide fresh insight. Additionally, they advised considering how the fear (or confidence) could be

serving the client at any given point as opposed to deliberately or automatically trying to address it.

Both coaches and clients observed that there is relatively little written about mid-life career reinvention and that coaches could help signpost resources for clients who wanted to learn more or normalise their experience in a wider context.

Conclusion

With longer working lives, we can expect to see a growing number of people considering what they want from their later working lives. Not everyone will want a significant change, some might want to make smaller adjustments or to continue with their current route.

This study found that coaching for those considering late career reinvention:

● Is less about decision making and more about discovering

● Is very contextual and readiness is impacted by a wide range of factors

● Is highly affected by a dynamic between fear and confidence

● Involves navigating a wide range of conversations and topics

For practitioners, this context can bring challenges and opportunities. The work is likely to be broader and over a longer time frame than some other forms of career coaching or guidance. The model provided could support practice development particularly around contracting, reflection or supervision.

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