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The draw of the law: Midlife women lawyers seeking to refocus on their legal careers after a break

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Abstract

This paper explores the drivers and experiences of midlife women lawyers seeking to refocus on their legal careers after a break. Studies suggest professional women rarely return to previous roles and research on the careers of midlife women is limited. Using reflexive thematic analysis, a qualitative study involving 11 midlife women lawyers identified three main themes - 'It's (all) about time', 'Expectations, roles, and identity', and 'Finding a new path-bridging the gap' - and an overarching theme of 'Emotions'. The research expands literature on women's careers at midlife providing a new model to support their career development.

Key words: women; identity; career break; midlife; return; law

Introduction

The underrepresentation of women at senior levels of the legal profession, despite its increasing feminisation, is well documented (SRA, 2023). Statistics show there are a significant number of women who are 'lost to law'. They leave the profession and do not return (The CEPLER, 2022; Miles & Fielder, 2017) many departing before partnership due to challenges in balancing work and family (Ganguli et al., 2021). While much research focuses on why women leave legal careers, there is little exploration of those who buck the trend and seek to return.

Further, the careers of midlife or 'older' women are understudied (Bimrose et al., 2014). Instead, research often involves younger women with children still at home (Atkinson et al., 2015; Ford et al., 2021). Given that family responsibilities can persist until children leave, many women seeking to refocus on their careers do so in their 40's or 50's as they are entering the realm of midlife. Infurna et al., (2020) suggest midlife is generally considered to span from 40 to 60 years of age, with some definitions extending this by a decade either side. Midlife represents a pivotal moment when individuals choose between 'generativity', a desire to contribute to society, and 'stagnation', a lack of purpose (Erikson, 1950; cited in Infurna et al., 2020). This suggests it is an ideal time to transition back into the workplace and a life stage worthy of more attention.

Given the current social and political landscape of increasing lifespans and Government campaigns to encourage older individuals back to work (DWP, 2022) coupled with The Law Society's pledge to support women returning to law (The Law Society, 2022) it makes sense to gain an understanding of what motivates this group and what their experiences are. My own background as a midlife woman lawyer who, in line with the findings in this research, left the profession and changed occupation, made me curious to explore these questions further. This research therefore examined the drivers and experiences of 11 midlife women lawyers between the ages 41 and 63 who were seeking to refocus on their legal careers after a break.

Literature review

Women's careers frequently deviate from traditional linear career paths. They work flexibly, have career breaks, and make compromises (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). This is often due to carrying out undervalued and unpaid domestic responsibilities in accordance with societal expectations (Schultheiss, 2013). Theories explaining careers as developing throughout life stages, such as Levinson's (1986) and Super's (1980), are considered inadequate to explain this lack of structure and criticised for being based on middle-class men. Boundaryless (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) and Protean (Hall, 2004) models, where individuals work flexibly across different organisations to free themselves of the rigid structures of organisations or in a way that accords with their own values, have been put forward as useful. However, these models assume a degree of agency which may not exist for women facing societal pressures or discrimination.

The Kaleidoscope Career Model (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) explains women's career patterns of 'opting-in' and 'opting-out' of the workplace as reflecting evolving values and needs. It suggests that, over time, there is a shift in focus from challenge to balance, and ultimately to authenticity. Other frameworks use terms like 'frayed' (Sabelis & Schilling, 2013) and 'careerscapes' (McKie et al., 2013) to portray career fluidity and lack of structure. Patton & McMahon (2006) suggest that the complex challenges women face in negotiating their careers can be understood through a Systems Theory Framework ('STF'). This approach highlights the multiple factors influencing women's career paths, including family pressures, societal expectations, personal choices, time considerations and even individual concepts of future possibilities (Ibarra, 1999; Markus and Nurius, 1986). These perspectives underscore the multifaceted nature of women's career paths, shaped by internal values and external influences.

Linked to this is the 'relational' nature of women's careers (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Motulsky, 2010). Decisions are made in the context of other people including husbands,

children, and parents (Etaugh, 2013). Forming connections throughout life, particularly with other women (Hurst et al., 2017), is a key source of support (Motulsky, 2020). Notably, women expect more support from women managers than male ones (Hurst et al., 2017). Further, the quality of women's hierarchical relationships at work affects not only work life but personal and family as well, especially when they are perceived as unsupportive (Hurst et al., 2017).

Women's careers at midlife

Existing studies on the careers of midlife women, although limited, suggest the reemergence of the desire for challenge as women get older (August, 2010; Cabrera, 2007). O'Neil and Bilimoria (2005) describe a focus on 'reinventive contribution' after 45 which reflects a 'reclaiming' of career. This may relate to the choice of 'generativity' over 'stagnation' (Erikson, 1950; cited in Infurna et al., 2020).

Other studies explore the support required for midlife career transitions. Motulsky (2010) highlights the importance of relationships during this period. Bimrose et al., (2015) suggest coaching may be a particularly helpful intervention to help clarify career goals through the reflection on past, present and future events (Infurna et al., 2020). The HERO framework (Luthans et al., 2007), which highlights the psychological resources of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, may also offer a valuable lens through which to support individuals facing career transitions in midlife.

It is worth noting that women who have taken extended career breaks to take on domestic responsibilities are often excluded from studies. It has been suggested that they face unique pressures and a potential 'loss of themselves' (Locke & Gibbons, 2008). This points to the need for further research on the salience of career roles for this group (Grady & McCarthy, 2008) and the potential benefits returning to work could have on personal identity.

Factors influencing women's decisions to return to the workplace

While financial need factors into the decisions of women to return to work, the need to develop confidence, a desire for intellectual stimulation, and children becoming more independent are also influential (Bian & Wang, 2019; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Interestingly, research indicates professional women rarely return to previous roles, shifting instead to more altruistic careers, suggesting a change of values during the break (Cabrera, 2007; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). This could help to explain evidence that women lawyers rarely return to their legal careers.

In the absence of research on women who seek to return to law, studies indicating they join the profession for its intellectual challenges and growth opportunities (Ballard, 1998 as cited in Patton, 2005; Webley & Duff, 2007) may provide some insight into their desire to go back. Further, research on women returning to science, engineering, and technology ('SET') professions, similarly gendered and therefore providing a useful reference point, highlights connectedness to their profession as a motivator to go back (Herman, 2015). This suggests a link between career and identity. Other matters which affect original career choice, such as societal influence (Gottfredson, 1981) and family norms or 'inherited' careers (Inkson, 2004), may also factor into the desire to remain in a particular profession and highlight how occupation, identity and both internal and external expectations are intertwined.

Experiences and emotions of returners

In considering the experiences of women returning to work after a break, studies indicate women encounter several barriers to career development (Bian & Wang, 2019; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Zimmerman & Clarke, 2016). These include a lack of key resources identified by research as necessary to pursuing new opportunities and reintegrating into the workplace. Among them are confidence (Savickas, 1997), self-efficacy or self-belief, (Bandura, 1977), and social networks (O'Neil et al., 2008) but not necessarily legal technical skills which can be updated through appropriate training (Sommerlad & Sanderson, 2019 p209). The intersection of gender and age exacerbates the challenges faced and can result in a sense of diminished identity and voice (Ford et al., 2021).

Negative emotions are common in individuals job hunting after a break (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012) as well as in those subject to ageism (Chasteen, 2012). Significantly, but often ignored, strong emotions have been identified as an important driver in transitions (Kidd, 1996). The fear and uncertainty experienced when in a state of transition, or 'liminality', may be necessary for personal growth and to facilitate the movement to a more stable phase of life (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

Methodology

The study involved 11 women solicitors aged between 41- 63 who had taken a break from the legal profession at some point during their careers and had returned or were seeking to return. The focus was on understudied 'older' or 'midlife' women and their decisions to and experiences of seeking a re-entry to the gendered, linear career structure of law. 'Break' was defined as a break from the legal profession rather than from work entirely. All of the women had children, but this was not a requirement for the study. The timing, length and number of breaks and ages of their children varied. Participants were identified through personal contacts and agencies for women returners. See Table 1 for participant demographics.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participant	Age at interview	Age range of children	Length of break from law	Type of work/ current situation
P1	51	Secondary school to over 18	Over 5 years	Commercial/in a legal role/private practice/contractor/looking for a new role
P2	56	Secondary school to over 18	Over 5 years	Mix of commercial and non-commercial/private practice/contractor/looking to expand role
P3	60's	Over 18	Over 5 years	Commercial /in a legal role/in-house/possibly leaving
P4	48	Secondary school	Over 5 years	Commercial/in a legal role/private practice
P5	54	Over 18	Over 10 years	Commercial/in a legal role/private practice

Participant	Age at interview	Age range of children	Length of break from law	Type of work/current situation
P6	44	Unknown	Under 5 years	Commercial/in a legal role/private practice/contractor
P7	54	Over 18	Over 5 years	Commercial/in a legal role/private practice/non-fee earning
P8	60's	Over 18	Unknown	Non-commercial/non-legal/contractor/looking to move to legal role
P9	41	Primary to secondary school	Over 10 years	Non-commercial/in a legal role/private practice/looking for new role
P10	55	Unknown	Unknown	Non-commercial/private practice/left a legal role
P11	48	Secondary school	Over 10 years	Commercial/in a legal role/private practice

A qualitative research approach was adopted to '[give] voice' (O'Neil et al., 2008) to women's experiences, aligning with calls to study women's career development beyond a positivist paradigm (Patton & McMahon, 2006). To support this, semi-structured interviews were used to collect 'descriptive data reflecting lived experiences' (Gill, 2015). Reflexive thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's 6-stage guide (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Themes and patterns were identified by both immersing myself in the data and standing back from it. In this process, I was mindful of my own similarities to the participants as a midlife woman solicitor and tried to avoid the expression of personal views and thoughts. At the same time, I remained aware that my subjectivity was a 'primary tool' in analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I was surprised by the emotional demands placed on me through hearing the stories of the participants which at times resonated with my own. I received supervisory support throughout the process to help me put distance between myself and the data and facilitate the critical reflection needed.

Findings

The participants' career paths were characterised by career breaks and flexible work. Usually, this was to accommodate caring roles and husbands' jobs. Sometimes it was due to health reasons - their own or those of a family member. This compromise was often supported by the view that taking responsibility for the domestic role was '*the right thing to do*' (P5).

The duration of the breaks from law varied. The longest was 20 years and the shortest, 18 months. The timing and number of breaks also differed. Many had taken several breaks. Some took breaks when children were young and others when children were teenagers. The latter often related to a belief, sometimes expressed as a realisation, that older children still need a parental presence.

All participants had spent a period or periods without paid work to take on domestic responsibilities. However, the majority found non-legal and, in their view less demanding,

work which still allowed them to accommodate these duties. Whilst over half the participants were practising as solicitors at the time of the study, this did not always represent a refocus on career. Many were still seeking alternative roles with better career progression. Those returners whose roles did represent a return to career had usually found them through returner programmes or professional contacts rather than through legal recruiters. Two participants who had returned to a career-focussed legal role anticipated, or were already taking, a further break to manage domestic responsibilities, this time, unrelated to children.

Drawing on Herman's (2015) study of women returning to SET professions, three storylines reflecting the participants' differing stages of transition were identified: 'Made it back!', 'Unfinished business', and 'Made it back – possible retreat'. These are illustrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Participant narratives illustrating stage of transition

STAGE	NARRATIVE	PARTICIPANTS
Made it back!	Women who had re-entered the legal profession in a role they saw as providing career progression. All returns through returner programmes, specialist returner recruiters or back to previous firms (through networks).	P4, P5, P6, P7, P11
Unfinished business	Women trying to refocus on legal career through changing job, increasing client base, finding a permanent role or internal promotion.	P1, P2, P8, P9
Made it back – possible retreat	Women who had returned to law after a break but had since left or were thinking of leaving again.	P3, P10

Whilst not identical to the narratives in Herman (2015), which were labelled 'Rebooting', 'Rerouting' and 'Retreating', as in that study, these stages of transition give context to the data obtained.

Through thematic analysis, key themes were identified across the narratives which reflected the lived experiences of the group.

Drivers

The first research question explored the drivers for midlife women lawyers to refocus on their legal careers after a break. Two themes and six subthemes were identified (Table 3):

Table 3. Themes relating to research question 1: What are the drivers for mid-life women lawyers to refocus on their legal careers after a break?

Theme	Subthemes
It's (all) about time	The past matters/matters of the past Time for action Imagined futures
Expectations, roles, and identity	Great expectations Shifting roles and reclaiming my identity 'Being' a lawyer

It's (all) about time

Time was identified as a central theme and drove choices. References to past, present, and future permeated the narratives of the participants.

Past decisions to scale back on or depart from legal careers due to life events, including own and others' health, and husbands' jobs taking priority, had impacted careers and were often looked on with regret. P1 used the negative metaphor of 'stepping out of the picture' to describe her departure from law, highlighting her feeling of absence or invisibility, and positioned it as 'a big mistake'. Negative experiences and associated feelings often added clarity and impetus to the desire to return to the law to complete something unfinished.

Participants expressed urgency to act in the present - 'It's either now or never' (P4) - due to age and diminishing opportunities. P9 envisioned her career as a sailing ship if she left it any longer to return. Imagined futures were regarded with fear of lack of purpose, structure, or ambition:

Having nothing between now and death, like no structure.... felt a bit...existential. (P7)

I'll be pretty good at cupcakes and that's about it. (P11).

On the other hand, P2 saw future possibilities and expressed hope and yearning for the 'glittering prizes' a career could offer and which she still saw in her reach:

I think I could be so much better, I could do so much better..., I've got a good few years left. (P2)

Expectations, roles, and identity

Participants had expectations of themselves to work and have a fulfilling career, in contrast to a 'job', as well as to take on the domestic role.

However, they devalued their domestic role, describing it as 'plodding around' (P2), 'messaging around' (P4), 'doing nothing' (P5), and being 'stuck' (P5). Some voiced guilt about not working and 'relaxing with a baby' (P7), 'not bringing money in' (P7), or 'wasting qualifications' (P2). At the same time, disapproval of women lawyers who worked full time 'never [seeing] their children' (P1) and employing 'wrap around childcare' (P9) was expressed, suggesting conflicting values and expectations of other women.

For those with older children, roles shifted, and work became more accessible offering an escape from domesticity. P10 described the 'freedom [it gave her] to work full time'. Returning to law resulted in a reclaiming or reconnection with an old self and a feeling of 'time...collapsing' (P7) and 'coming full circle' (P4) linking back to theme 1 - 'It's (all) about time'. For P3 returning to work meant getting back to her authentic self. She described an intense feeling of 'this is not me' whilst washing up at the kitchen sink one day, suggesting her identity was suspended whilst she was at home.

Work was frequently framed as a physical escape and something better than being at home. P11 said it was 'almost like going to the spa' and P1 stated bluntly, 'I just wanted to get out of the house'. P9, on the other hand, who had young children at home, saw the ability to

work at home as offering greater opportunity to balance career and family, suggesting it is the age of children, and therefore stage rather than age, that determines professional needs and choices.

Participants were ambitious to find a role which reflected their skills and qualifications, allowing them to pick up their career path where they had left off. P11 described a friend's decision to train as a Pilates teacher as 'not really career moves, but just things to occupy time', demonstrating her expectations around what constitutes a career. Being a lawyer was important to the women and provided an identity offering 'status' (P4) and belonging, like being part of a 'club' (P4). It also demonstrated intellectual ability - 'not being a blonde bimbo' (P9) - and was considered 'a proper job' (P5), offering job satisfaction - 'what I love to do' (P5).

Some participants came from backgrounds described as 'difficult' (P10), 'rough' (P3) and 'deprived' (P9), for whom law offered prestige, opportunities, and security. Those who did not fall into this category often had professional parents whose expectations they were subject to: 'lawyer...doctor... accountant, but anything else was probably a bit too flowery' (P6). Perhaps the identity offered to both these groups through being a lawyer was the driver to return to the profession rather than choose an alternative role.

Experiences

The second research question examined the participants' experiences in refocusing on their legal careers. One theme and three sub-themes were identified (Table 4):

Table 4. Themes relating to research question 2: what are the experiences of midlife women lawyers in refocusing on their legal careers after a break?

Theme	Subthemes
Finding a new path – bridging the gap	Finding ways to fit in Dealing with perceptions – mine and other people's Conflicting selves

Narratives revealed barriers relating to the participants' ages and career breaks and the strategies and resources which helped them move forwards.

The difficulty in fitting back into the linear career path of the legal profession was frequently voiced:

There were a lot of conversations about, "oooh, how do we treat you? Where do we put you?" (P10)

Relationships were important for re-entering the legal world. Participants found their way back into roles through connections. These included friends, old colleagues and other women at the school gates. P4 explained 'I just worked my contacts really'. They also developed links with specialist recruitment agencies focusing on women returners. Once in work,

participants formed relationships with other women returners, younger women lawyers, and administrative staff, to help them reintegrate. Strikingly, they did not regard senior women lawyers who had continued to work as a source of support. P1 said they 'made it tough for me' and P4 suggested these senior women felt 'judged' by those of them who had stayed at home.

Participants were frustrated by what they felt other people's perceptions were about their age, abilities, and desire to return to law. Their assumption was that recruitment consultants saw them as old and incompetent ('irrelevant, just irrelevant' and 'out of date' P5). They referred to other women lawyers in their social circles who had not returned thinking they were 'mad' (P4) for wanting to go back. However, there was a determination not to allow this to influence their commitment.

The women had their own perceptions about the age and gender of recruiters. P5 called them 'useless' with their 'young preconceptions' which 'made me more determined really'. P4 said:

The recruiters I spoke to were men.... I could be judging them wrongly... They sounded very young...I felt really [pause] dismissed, I suppose, by them.

Not least, participants battled with conflicting feelings around confidence. On the one hand they felt out of touch with the workplace but on the other, recognised a confidence which came with maturity. This suggested a reframing of the negative narrative of 'past it' (P5) with a positive one of wisdom:

that sort of slight lack of confidence [but] on the other hand, more comfortable... more confident in your abilities. (P8)

I am a grown up and I know what I'm doing. (P11)

Those who had returned to work felt their legal skills came back quickly which in turn increased their confidence. P1 felt it was IT skills that were lacking rather than legal knowledge which you can 'swot up on'.

Overarching theme: Emotions

Emotions, both negative and positive, ran through the participants' narratives, highlighting the complexity of the transition back to work.

Negative emotions included 'regret' (P1) over taking a long career break, guilt for not 'working and [being] productive' and 'bringing money in' (P7) and fear over going back to work - 'terrifying...really terrifying' (P1). Self-doubt often arose from feelings of vulnerability caused by having to explain the career break (P1). P5 expressed her anger and frustration towards recruiters, rejecting what she saw as ageist assumptions with a defiant: 'F*** you and your young preconceptions about stuff'.

Positive emotions were less prevalent but did exist, for example excitement about re-entering the professional world: 'I was like, oh my goodness. Like, I'm in the City again...how do I sit

on a bar stool?’ (P7) and satisfaction about being back at work: ‘most of the time ...I’m really glad that I did it’ (P4).

Participants sometimes expressed gratitude for example when receiving support from specialist recruiters (‘She was so lovely’ [P7]). Occasionally this was expressed negatively:

I think the risk is, you feel so grateful that anyone will look at a person of your age who’s not worked. (P1)

Patterns across participant narratives and demographic factors

There was no clear pattern in how the themes applied across the three participant narratives. The sub-theme ‘Finding ways to fit in’ was more prominent among participants who had secured a role. This is unsurprising as they had often demonstrated flexibility through, for example, accepting a junior position or working as a contractor, to facilitate a return.

A range of emotions appeared across all narratives. Those who had secured a role conveyed feelings of pride in their achievement and in acting as role models for future generations. However, they also, along with those who were still searching, expressed disillusionment and lack of confidence in relation to their experiences resulting in associated emotions such as anger and anxiety.

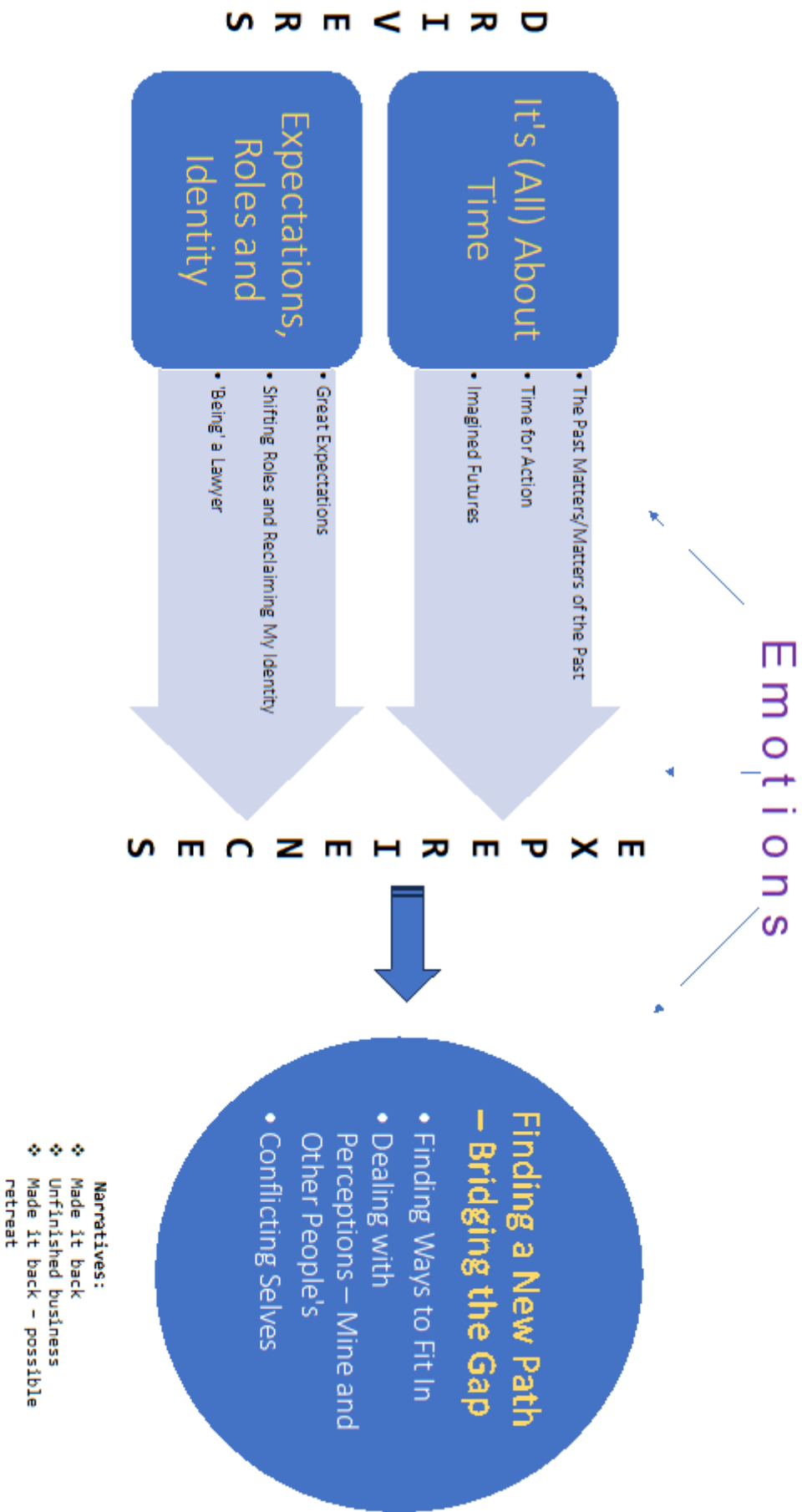
Significantly, length of break and age of children did not appear to determine a participant’s success in finding a role. Two out of the three participants who had taken a break of over 10 years had ‘Made it back!’ and there was a range of children’s ages for those in that group. This highlights the importance of resources both internal, such as adaptability and determination, and external, for example professional networks or support from recruitment agencies, rather than demographic factors.

Thematic map

The findings were arranged in a thematic map (see Figure 1) showing theme 1 (It’s (all) about time) and theme 2 (Expectations, roles, and identity) as driving the decision to refocus on a legal career. Theme 3 (Finding a new path – bridging the gap) illustrates the internal and external resources drawn upon by the returners once the decision was made whilst at the same time navigating a range of negative perceptions, including their own. The overarching theme of ‘Emotions’ sits above the themes to highlight how they permeated the transition process. Further, the three narratives are listed at the bottom right-hand corner of the map as a reminder that individuals were at different stages of their journey.

This model can be used in career coaching to explore the multiple influences on women’s decisions at midlife when deciding to refocus on a previous career and the resources needed to deal with challenges faced.

Figure 1. Thematic map – model for use in career coaching



Discussion

The non-linear career paths of the participants in this study aligns with research on the complexity of women's careers (Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). Descriptions by participants that returning to law felt as if time was circular or had collapsed, rather than as a straightforward progression, is in stark contrast to the linear career structure still offered by the profession, illustrating the difficulties faced by women looking to re-enter the field.

As emphasised in earlier studies and theoretical frameworks, temporal considerations were important in decision making. This reflects systemic theories recognising the holistic nature of women's careers and the multiple influencing factors (McKie et al., 2013; Patton & McMahon et al., 2006). Further, participants' interconnection of earlier and later life periods and the corresponding sense of urgency to act in the present, supports theories that see midlife as a pivotal moment (Infurna et al., 2020). Reflection on past experiences clarified future goals supporting career construction theory (Savickas, 2012), while imagining potential 'future selves' drove individuals to act, confirming the connection between cognition and motivation (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Perceived and often conflicting expectations imposed by others, including family, society, and the legal profession, as well as self, dominated narratives. These included the need to have a challenging career (in contrast to a 'job'), being a role model to children and other women lawyers, and taking responsibility for the domestic role. This is consistent with midlife being a period of role multiplicity (Infurna et al., 2020). High self-expectations to re-establish careers as childcare responsibilities lessened indicated a developmental need for challenge (August, 2011). The findings support models that position career needs as relating to life stage rather than age (Super, 1980). However, in contrast to Super's model which refers to midlife as a period of 'maintenance', this study suggests a desire for progression during this time.

Research highlighting women's lack of confidence when returning to work was confirmed (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Zimmerman & Clark, 2016). However, narratives in this research suggested that legal technical skills return quickly helping it to develop. In addition, the emergence of maturity-based confidence was evident, which may explain the desire for challenge at this life-stage. This new self-belief corresponds with the central role those at midlife hold in society, including as a link between generations (Infurna et al., 2020). Notably, there were no references to menopause which, given the ages of the participants and the current societal focus on its effects, including on career, is surprising but may reflect a desire to project resilience.

Many participants were looking to reestablish themselves in a similar role to the one they had left. This contrasts with research suggesting that midlife women seek to 'reinvent' themselves at work (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005) or take up a different more altruistic role (Cabrera, 2007; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012), both of which imply some form of change. The refocus on career was framed as a reclaiming of identity and felt more assertive, focussed, and proactive than a straightforward return. This 'taking back' may indicate a loss of identity whilst in a domestic role driving a desire to regain a previous self (Locke & Gibbons, 2008). It may also represent the strength of professional identity (Herman, 2015) and a corresponding need for authenticity, where the authentic self relates to 'being'

a lawyer. The role of lawyer was often expressed as having been earned through hard work suggesting it was an entitlement and something to be fought for.

Participants used different strategies to facilitate their return. Several relied on personal contacts to find job opportunities, consistent with research on the significance of connections in midlife transitions (Motulsky, 2010) and the importance of social capital in career development (O'Neil et al., 2008). For some, the support from recruitment firms targeting women returners was key. The fact that very few of the participants found a role through regular legal recruitment agencies was striking.

The importance of relationships in the careers of midlife women, particularly in the workplace, was confirmed (Motulsky, 2010). The effect negative hierarchical relationships with other women can have on women's career confidence and the expectations women have of women managers (Hurst et al., 2017) was clear. Support and mentorship from senior women lawyers is potentially a key factor in the reintegration of women into law.

The expression of strong emotions linked to job search challenges, such as anger and frustration, appeared to serve as a driver and a resilience-building mechanism, supporting research by Kidd (1998) on the central and often ignored role emotions play in transitions. Career coaching would provide a helpful space to explore and channel these emotions (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005).

Conclusion, practical implications and limitations

This study contributes to the literature on women lawyers and, more generally, professional women re-entering the workforce at midlife.

Midlife emerged as a period of reflection and role shifts, linked more to life stage than biological age, with temporal considerations providing a key influence. For this group, returning to law served as a way of obtaining the challenge they needed and reclaiming their deserved identity, rather than a reinvention. Being a lawyer had been earned through hard work and was worth fighting for. It also allowed them to contribute to society through work and role modelling therefore satisfying individual expectations, confirming their choice of 'generativity' rather than 'stagnation' (Erikson, 1950).

Use of personal resources, including social capital, the ability to connect with others, and mature confidence were key to surviving the challenges. Specialist agencies, unlike regular agencies, were able to provide external support through empathetic and targeted advice. This highlights their role as a crucial link between individuals and law firms to champion midlife women and provide them with a voice. The research suggests the need for a change of attitude from regular agencies if more midlife women are to re-enter the profession, particularly given the extent to which they are used by organisations to fill legal vacancies.

The research clearly shows that midlife does not signal the end of career and even more significantly, does not close the door to picking up where you left off – life can circle back. Technical skills can be revived and updated through relevant training and careers can be pursued with a new sense of confidence gained through age and life experience. This can be achieved with the help of personal resources and external support to navigate emotions and challenges.

Practical implications

Based on these findings, the thematic map (Figure 1) provides a coaching framework to support a return to work at midlife. Exploring past events and influences in a coaching relationship can help individuals reflect on their future expectations and envision their 'best possible self' (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Further, coaching can focus on building confidence, self-efficacy, and support networks to aid job searches. Narrative approaches (Savickas, 2012), 'provisional selves' (Ibarra, 1999), emotional exploration through an STF lens (Patton & McMahon, 2006) and practical goal setting as well as the HERO framework (Luthens et al., 2007), are suggested tools.

Law firms and the recruitment agencies they work with, as well as organisations in other industries, can benefit from this research by rethinking traditional career trajectories and recognising the value of life experience and maturity. Recruiters are often the first point of contact for job seekers in the legal industry and are therefore in a unique position to influence the hiring decisions of law firms.

Support through mentoring, specialist returner programs, and flexible working arrangements can help firms leverage the capabilities of midlife women. Additionally, firms should address unconscious biases that may discourage women from re-entering the field. This research suggests that support and mentorship from senior women lawyers may be particularly important.

Limitations and future research

This study was limited by a small, socioeconomically, and culturally homogenous sample. Further research could focus on women from diverse backgrounds, men who take breaks from law, and the role of support from senior women in reintegrating midlife women back into work. Further, research relating to the attitudes of legal recruitment agencies towards midlife women lawyers would be beneficial. Longitudinal studies could explore experiences post-return.

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