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# Employability in later-career: *narratives of decline or development*



**Russell Warhurst**  
**Kate Black**

# Employability: early *and* late







90 – 20



- The young are lauded and *“youth is often taken to be the norm”*

(Thomas *et al.*, 2014)

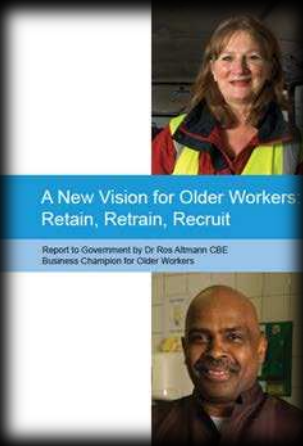
- *“Ageing demographics have been construed primarily as a problem”*

(Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009)

- Pervasive negative stereotypes of age: *“inflexible”, “change averse”, “less productive”, “dependent”*

(Fleischmann *et al.*, 2015)





## Department of Works and Pensions report (2015)

*“The over 50s are a major untapped resource” (p.5)*



## CIPD policy report (2015)

*“Many industries have a poor record on retaining older workers” (p.3)*



'LOOK AT YOU! SITTING THERE  
DOING NOTHING... WHY DON'T YOU  
GET A JOB LIKE OTHER PENSIONERS?!'







I D E N T I T Y

“Ascribed” or “achieved” ?



*Identity work – “being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness”*

(Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003)



- *“Discourses serve to regulate – to set limits on – the identity-work of individual older workers”*

(Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009, p.1200)



- Age as a positive identity resource ...  
*“discourses of resistance”*

(Fenwick, 2013; Corlett, 2015)

## Middle-managers as an exemplifying case of later-career employability challenges







*“Narrative inquiry ... a powerful means for understanding human behaviour”*

(Smith and Sparkes, 2009: 10)

Narrative inquiry is the interpretation of stories

*“We lead storied lives”*

(Connelly and Clandinin, 2007)



**Janice** was heading towards the end of a long career within local government. Although, aged 57, she felt that *“there’s still something in me that wants to do something else”*, and she was opportunistic in being *“a great believer that if it’s right the door it will open”*.

However, her **numerous recent and unsuccessful attempts at promotion** had left Janice feeling **vulnerable**. In discussing her most recent promotion opportunity she explained, *“I would have liked that job anyway, but I also felt that I should go for it to show that I was willing, so they don’t put me to graze, not just yet”*. Yet, in discussing this vacancy with her manager, she was disappointed to be told that she had little chance. She attributed her recent lack of success in gaining promotion and a recurring lack of feedback from the recruitment teams to the fact that *“I’ve got grey hair”*.

Accordingly, she was beginning to accept her **failure to progress further** within her organisation in asking herself, *“do I even look at a new job or is it better the devil I know? I’d like to retire at 61, 62 anyway”*. In rationalising this acceptance she explained *“I’ve got less energy than I had, and I’ve got less energy to think ‘I’ll try for that role’, so I just tend now to think ‘oh stuff it!’”*. *“That’s reality isn’t it? And things have just come a bit full circle as it happens when you get to this age, so I’ve concluded, ‘oh stuff it’”*.

Therefore, Janice was perhaps not surprisingly starting to consider her **retirement options** for *“3 or 4 years’ time”*. She explained how she would be able to have *“more holidays, have time with my husband, time for golf, time with my family and friends. What I do’na want to do is just retire and die”*. Yet, simultaneously she suggested that *“I might look at coming in 2-3 days a week though. I find difficulty in the thought of finishing work completely. I’d be bored as I’d always been looking for something, something that challenges me mentally”*. Fittingly, she had identified a number of possible activities that she might undertake: *“I could take my skills to work in schools, I could work in youth clubs. I could help to fundraise, I could write bids, all that kind of stuff”*.

**Debbie** had largely worked in large corporates but in 2008, aged 48, she had moved to a small private enterprise, then to the charity sector. She had recently returned to the corporate sector, as a consultant. Despite being in the later stages of her career, she still had an eye on her CV perceiving that her position and the **company name were critical**. For example, while she'd been working in the charity-sector she had been concerned about *"how this would look on my CV for when I want to get back into a larger business"*. By contrast, she explained how her current role, in insurance, was *"a really good sector for your CV"*. Debbie derived satisfaction from being a **successful change agent**. She enjoyed the *"stimulation"* of being able *"to think afresh, meet new people ... as it re-energises you, challenges your thinking"*. Yet having initiated this change, she felt *"it starts to become too same-y, so I move on"*. She saw her future in change programmes but *"on a more significant scale"* and in a project director role so that she could *"do less hands on nitty-gritty"*. In considering this future, she suggested that she was *"flexible about where I work, but it must be a business change role"*. While Debbie was **highly ambitious** and accomplished, she did not rest on her laurels and recognised that continuous learning from experience was central to her success. For example, she explained how working with a small HR services company had been so *"rewarding. Working with people of that level of intelligence and enthusiasm, I learned so much"*. Debbie was a highly confident manager, and this confidence had been developed through her rich experience and associated learning. She advocated the importance of *"being confident in your own skin"*, although she also admitted how earlier in her career *"I might have felt obliged to do things. Now I've learned to stop when I've been given something that's not my job to do. If you do it for expedience sake conveniently everyone will permanently assign it to you"*. Despite Debbie's optimism and progressive orientation, she had a **vulnerable** side. She explained how now as a consultant she was *"missing" the training*, learning and development support she'd had enjoyed as a permanent employee, especially as *"I've an area of weakness that I'd like to work on"*. Debbie also experienced **self-doubt** in now being required to delegate since, throughout her career to date, she **had been** in control of all activity. That she needed to be more trusting of others was causing her considerable angst, as *"I'm not particularly trusting"*.



## Counter-discourses of employability

- *“problem-solvers”*
  - *“strategists” (“policy-makers”)*
  - *“change-agents”*
  - *“challenge-seekers”*
  - *“learners”*
- 
- *“Not ... passive receptacles or carriers of discourse but, instead, more or less actively and critically interpret and enact them”*

(Alvesson and Willmott, 2002;  
Thomas *et al.*, 2014)





## Employability *implications*

- Work equates with well-being  
*but*
- Complicity with neo-liberal policy agenda of active ageing
- Awareness and challenge:  
Discourses of decline
- Reflexive questioning:  
*“Who am I ... who might I still be?”*