

Career Growth among Men in Mid-Life and Beyond: Self-Actualisers, Career-Builders, Coasters and Grafters

Mike Clark (CESR) and John Arnold (Loughborough University)

Hardly a day goes by without a mention in the news, professional press or academia of the employment challenges posed by ageing populations. Strange, then, that reports on the career experiences of older employees, a steadily growing number, are few and far between. In the following article, we respond to this neglect, not only by focusing attention on mid-career and beyond, but also by developing a typology of career growth to help us reflect systematically upon some aspects of older workers' careers.

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

The question of continuing growth in middle and later career is important for both individuals and organisations because of the link between growth and creative engagement with work. People who experience career growth are expanding their opportunity and ability to contribute. Continuing growth, especially where it takes intrinsic forms, is crucial in middle and later career, since it can counteract the common middle age experiences of feeling stale, ground down, and drained by the unrelenting pressures of work and responsibility. When people start to feel tired and jaded, growth can help to renew their energies and enthusiasm. A consequence of career plateauing and the transition to career maintenance is that organisations may increasingly be populated by older individuals who lack both extrinsic and intrinsic incentives for growth. What are the likely consequences, and do they matter? How can older workers be helped to keep going, growing and contributing?

We describe here briefly a 'typology' of middle and later career which is intended to stimulate discussion of this issue. Our analysis draws on the results of a study carried out in 2002–04, where our aim was to find out how much career growth occurs in middle and later career, what forms it takes, and in what circumstances it occurs. Each of 41 individuals aged 45–55 took part in up to twelve hours of interviews and psychometrics.

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

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

Figure 1 A typology of middle and later career

<p>Self-Actualisers <i>Career still growing but not central to life.</i> Want: job content; novelty; challenge; creativity Fear: boredom, loss of autonomy, personal stagnation</p>	<p>Career-Builders <i>Career still growing and central to life.</i> Want: impact; recognition; advancement; challenge Fear: marginalisation, career stagnation</p>
<p>Coasters <i>Career no longer growing and not central to life.</i> Want: security; material comfort; respect for skill/seniority Fear: premature redundancy</p>	<p>Grafters <i>Career no longer growing but work central to life.</i> Want: satisfaction of work; valued contribution; feeling of worth Fear: burnout, impoverishment of non-work selves</p>

The first quadrant (high growth, low career centrality) refers to a group of men who continued to seek and experience lively growth, but for whom climbing a career ladder was not a prime concern. These individuals described their intolerance of boredom and routine, and a continuing need for tasks and roles which challenged their expertise and creativity. Congenial work content and a sense of autonomy were central to their feelings of well-being. Self-renewal through work was often complemented by well-developed, creative interests outside work.

Because of their appetite for learning and discovery, we call this group *Self-Actualisers*, but not without misgivings: self-actualisation often implies egocentricity, but several members of the group clearly valued growth as much because it enhanced their ability to serve others as for its contribution to their own fulfilment. Self-actualisers feared stagnating work content more than the career plateau. Members of this group often appeared naïve or inept in managing their careers and, although far from indifferent to recognition, continued to rely substantially upon interventions by shrewd, imaginative or conscientious sponsors for continuing access to suitable work and career progression.

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

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

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

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

Overlap between occupation and career type was limited, although men in managerial roles (regardless of occupation) were more likely among *Career-Builders*, and shopfloor employees among *Coasters*. The four types describe configurations of growth and career/work centrality which may apply to any period of career. However, what is especially significant in this period of career are (i) an accelerating trend for individuals to move from the high-growth to the low-growth quadrants as they plateau and/or move to a maintenance outlook on career; (ii) gradually declining career and work centrality, which we would expect to gather pace as individuals near retirement; and (iii) individuals' increased vulnerability to stress, fatigue and depletion. These trends pose a tough career management challenge to both organisations and individuals.

We believe that the model's main value for middle and later career lies in the possibilities it suggests for matching career interventions to individual need. For example, whereas *Coasters* may respond to performance management and benefit from exit strategies, *Grafters* require strategies for managing self-worth, renewal and overwork.

Thus, whilst few of the latter described growth activities which they had initiated spontaneously, most nevertheless welcomed the stimulus and learning which they said had occurred when they were required, for example, to rotate between jobs, take on new tasks, or teach a new subject. *Self-actualisers* require technical challenge and flexibility for shaping job content in such a way that their contribution to organisational goals can also reflect their emerging interests. Their career-management ineptitude suggests the continuing importance of organisation-led interventions for optimising their contribution to the organisation and their own fulfilment. *Career-builders* require progression, job rotation, timely and honest feedback concerning their prospects, and guidance concerning career options which may facilitate continued advancement. Where advancement opportunities are blocked, organisations need to provide long salary scales, which allow individuals whose contribution is outstanding to enjoy continued salary progression and recognition when advancement is no longer possible. The sabbatical or secondment which may help to revive a flagging *Grafter* is unlikely to appeal to the *Career-Builder*, for whom continuing visibility is especially crucial when time for advancement is running out. Similarly, stepping down into a less demanding role may be a strategy for managing stress/depletion which is better suited to *Self-Actualisers/Grafters* than *Career-Builders*. And so on. This points to a central purpose of the model: helping people and organisations to target career interventions in more differentiated, and hence more appropriate ways.

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

References

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