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CHAPTER 13: OLDER WORKERS' TRANSITIONS IN WORK-RELATED LEARNING, CAREERS AND IDENTITIES

Jenny Bimrose and Alan Brown

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines how older workers, aged over 45, have moved through different work and learning contexts as their careers and identities have developed over time. The strategic biographies of five older workers are traced, as they responded to the challenges of continuing to develop their work-related learning, careers and identities. These five have been chosen from a research sample of over 100 individuals in order to illuminate three broad patterns of response: up-skilling, re-skilling and disengagement. The cases demonstrate the value of learning while working as this helped individuals keep their skills, knowledge and competences up-to-date and maintain a positive disposition towards learning. Access to opportunities for learning and development is crucially important, though some individuals were much more pro-active than others in taking advantage of these opportunities.

Older people are becoming an ever larger proportion of the population and recent employment legislation has been in part designed to encourage older workers to continue working, with workers over 65 having the 'right to request' a constructive dialogue with their employer about that option. However, without a cultural change that values older workers' contribution there could be huge waste of human resource and potential (Fitzpatrick 2006). Distinctions between work and retirement are also likely to become increasingly blurred by the notion of semi-retirement as a way of easing the transition from work to full retirement, with employees moving into self-employment, taking short-term contracts, reducing their working hours or moving away from their previous main line of work (Humphrey *et al.* 2003). So with changing expectations of how long many people will work, and as the workforce ages, there are challenges of supporting the continuing education and development of older workers, as workers may need to maintain a set of work-related competences and manage effective work transitions for much longer than has been customary in the past.

Research interviews were used to construct 'strategic biographies' of the learning and development of over 100 individuals, who were working or had worked for long periods in the engineering, telecommunications or ICT industries. These occupational settings were chosen for two reasons. First, they were relatively knowledge-intensive, with the assumption that workers would be expected or encouraged to update their work-related skills, knowledge and understanding.

Secondly, some respondents had pointed out that it was sometimes difficult to enter, or progress within, some forms of employment in these sectors once you were over 40 because of employer prejudice – especially from a position of being unemployed. This finding is in line with other reports of age discrimination (Age Concern 2005).

From these biographies five exemplars of individuals' 'strategic biographies' of learning and development were chosen to represent different approaches to up-skilling, re-skilling or disengagement, which illustrate the role of individual agency in managing change. Some broader policy implications are also considered.

WORK-RELATED LEARNING, CAREERS AND IDENTITIES OF OLDER WORKERS

Brown (1997) identified the importance of the degree of challenge in work activities, the nature of interactions with other people at work and motivation and commitment in how individuals viewed their developing work-related identities. For older workers the biographical dimension of an individual's past and their current understanding of their past experiences of work, learning, careers and identities (their career story) was also likely to be significant. The dominant representation of the work-related learning, careers and identities of many of the 100 older workers interviewed was that they identified with their work, although sometimes with reservations. However, given the attention often given to those facing substantive problems, it is important to emphasise that our research identified many older workers who not only strongly identified with their work, but who also saw learning and development as a 'normal' and continuing part of their job.

In order to understand the approaches to work-related learning and development of older workers it is useful to break up their biographies into different time periods or segments and to identify those phases when there is more or less intensive learning and development. This is because the extent with which workers engage in learning varies over time, so it is important not to assume that individuals follow a single trajectory. It is also important to recognise that individuals can and do engage differently with learning and development over time, with people's overall skill development moving between periods of relative stability, incremental development, intensive development and decay. Furthermore, different sets of skills, knowledge and understanding could be moving in different directions at the same time. The advantage of looking at learning in different phases is that this could be used to represent the extent of changes in development of particular skill sets rather than just overall development – with development being more or less intense at different times.

In our research, the focus was on substantive learning: that is, learning that produces a significant change in skills, knowledge, understanding, values, attitudes or behaviour, including in individuals' approach to learning. When workers engaged in substantive learning and development, their work-related learning could be

represented as being primarily concerned with up-skilling (within a current occupation and/or organisation) or re-skilling (linked to an actual or proposed career change) with the step change in development of work-related skills, knowledge and understanding in either approach being intensive or incremental. Additionally, workers could be disengaged from the whole idea of work-related learning and development. These patterns of behaviour can be conceptualised in terms of strategic action. Analysis of the interviews highlighted how the relationship between older workers and their work-related roles could be represented in terms of their patterns of strategic action across a range of structural, cultural and social contexts (compare Pollard *et al.* 2000). Their experiences could be mapped in terms of their patterns of relationships, orientation and adaptive response to work and it was possible to trace the dynamic development of individuals' characteristic repertoires of strategic action - their 'strategic biographies' (Brown 2004).

Identifying different forms of strategic action did help give meaning and shape to our interviewees' career histories by outlining some typical and relatively coherent repertoires of strategic response to the challenges posed by the development of their work-related learning, careers and identities. The two pro-active responses from individuals of up-skilling and re-skilling could make use of primarily intensive or incremental development and examples of workers representing each of these four trajectories will be presented. The fifth case illustrates where an individual became progressively disengaged from any attempt to develop his work-related skills and knowledge

INTENSIVE UP-SKILLING

Aaron is in his mid-fifties and works for a small specialist aircraft and submarine engineering company which employs 60 people and where technically qualified workers play a key role. Five years previously, Aaron, a chief inspector at the time, was appointed as a 'change agent' to implement an approach to continuous process improvement that was being supported by the lead company in their supply chain network, where Aaron previously worked as an inspector for 10 years. The 'change agent' training and subsequent application of what had been learned involved Aaron in the development of new techniques, training of other workers, changes to the organisation of work and organisational culture that required considerable skills in the 'management of change.'

Aaron had completed an engineering apprenticeship, but the nature of his technically demanding work and progression through a series of jobs with increasing responsibility meant he was used to learning while working and was not daunted by being given highly challenging work that was pivotal for the future of the company. The company had no hesitation in giving this key role to a worker in his fifties, even though he had not engaged in formal education and training for over twenty five years. Rather Aaron's depth and breadth of technical understanding, work process

knowledge and problem-solving abilities meant he was considered ideal for this key role.

The 'change agent' training had led to personal development and Aaron commented: 'I have become more interested in problem solving. (...) I still want to carry on learning and gain further qualifications.' One of the key aspects of Aaron's role was to facilitate the learning of others when cascading the approach to continuous improvement within the company and this required a deep commitment to continuing learning and development. It is particularly striking that for Aaron the greatest development in his skills, knowledge and understanding at work had taken place in his fifties. The training (a one week workshop plus a series of follow-up one day workshops and application visits to other companies in the supply chain) was very helpful, but the greatest development came through meeting the challenges associated with his day-to-day work of implementing continuous process improvement over several years. These work activities, by their very nature, were highly challenging and required utilisation of a full range of skills, knowledge and experience from all those involved in the development teams that Aaron had to facilitate. Additionally, the resulting transformation of how Aaron viewed his own continuing learning and development meant that he was going to study for further qualifications.

Four broader issues are noteworthy, here. First, learning while working is often the most painless way to develop skills, knowledge and understanding, as learning and development are fully integrated with working. Secondly, this case highlights the importance of not pathologising the problems that older workers face in learning new skills. Aaron and his contemporaries were chosen as 'change agents' because they had extensive work process knowledge and strongly identified both with the company and their jobs, and were able to operate in cross-disciplinary and cross-hierarchical work teams. Thirdly, being involved in substantive learning and development often acted as a spur to a transformation in the self-perception and self-confidence of older workers. Fourthly, the interaction of training and creating opportunities for significant learning experiences at work meant it was possible to support learning and innovation in small companies, where traditionally it has often been difficult.

The developmental nature of work activities undertaken by Aaron influenced his positive orientation to learning and development and his commitment to up-skilling, which, over time, had been largely accomplished through incremental skill development, with learning being seen as a 'natural' part of work. Yet Aaron has also had periods of intensive up-skilling, when changing jobs, getting promoted and acting as a 'change agent'. Over his work career there were four distinct periods (each lasting a few years) when work presented a particularly strong learning challenge and resulted in intensive up-skilling. The rest of the time learning and development continued incrementally. This differential pacing is important in relation to the policy rhetoric about lifelong learning – it may be more helpful to acknowledge substantive learning is often periodic rather continuous over a career. Even in a long career with

continuing technical development in a knowledge-intensive industry, Aaron had often not been required to make any special effort to up-skill. Learning while working on challenging activities, together with a commitment to work, made this type of learning seem routine. The work activities themselves were challenging and Aaron experienced a sense of achievement in meeting these challenges.

Aaron's work activities involved multi-disciplinary, inter-organisational and non-hierarchical team work as well as rich and varied interactions with other employees, managers, suppliers, customers and members of the supply chain and his own personal networks. Such relationships provided support, recognition that his expertise was valued and an opportunity to support the learning of others - a role he relished both at work and in his private life (he had taught chess for many years).

In relation to his work identity, Aaron exhibited very high organisational and occupational commitment. Everyone recognised that he possessed valuable expertise, based on his extensive work process knowledge, and this contributed to Aaron's being highly motivated and exhibiting a strong attachment to and identification with work. Overall, Aaron's work activities, interactions and identities acted powerfully together in concert producing a strong sense of agency in his approach to learning and development. He was not only committed to up-skilling, but also to broader aspects of learning and development.

Substantive up-skilling does not necessarily occur in the workplace, some individuals engaged in education-based mid-career professional development. For instance, some older workers in engineering, telecommunications or ICT had completed Masters or other qualifications in their thirties or forties. Some other interviewees, however, who were also following strong work-based up-skilling trajectories, did so incrementally, through career progression that involved switching companies and/or jobs in order to broaden their experience, as well as taking on more challenging roles. One case of a person following such a trajectory will now be presented.

INCREMENTAL UP-SKILLING OVER A LONG PERIOD

Substantive up-skilling can be incremental, where an individual, after completing initial education and training, relies for their learning and development almost exclusively on meeting changing requirements at work. An example of someone following this trajectory was Cliff, who had progressed from being an apprentice, technician, production engineer, claims adviser and had moved ultimately into a management position. Cliff was in his early fifties and had been with the same company, a car and truck manufacturer, for well over 30 years. He had, however, adapted to work in the company rather than maintaining a strong work identity. He completed an apprenticeship, continued learning on and off-the-job, eventually gaining a Higher National Certificate in Engineering and became a production engineer. Cliff then worked as a junior, then senior, claims assessor, deciding how

much it would cost to repair company vehicles under warranty, authorising repairs (or writing off the vehicles) and deciding the value of a claim under warranty. Cliff was promoted further through a succession of management posts in merchandising, sales and marketing. However, by the time Cliff became a manager he did not identify with the company, no longer had a (technical) occupational attachment, and had no sense of needing or wishing to take any further qualifications. Cliff felt that once you reached management level the company tended to be quite ruthless in terms of what they expected from you: 'They certainly don't care about their employees' domestic and family circumstances.'

While Cliff routinely worked in three different locations for the company that he could travel to from home, three times he had also been relocated to offices over a hundred miles away. Particularly when drafted into positions such as regional manager, Cliff felt he had no choice but to agree to these relocations, even though this meant living away from home for between eighteen months and three years at a time. He felt keenly that whilst he had made sacrifices, the company had gained: 'You have no social life, so you might as well work all hours God sends.' Family was seen as unimportant by the company: 'Don't worry about the family. Just relocate and get the job started'. The only concession was leaving work early on Friday and arriving a bit later on Monday, but only when no meetings were scheduled.

He had no intention of 'putting the company first', as did some of his colleagues. Instead, he preferred to put his children first, trying to ensure they had stability whilst at school. This had become 'a bone of contention with his manager'. He had been told that he needed to be mobile to get ahead in a large company, because: 'only a very few - the three per cent who are high fliers - get their careers planned and for the rest it is a scramble.' Not only was he under pressure to relocate, where and when the company required, it was not always easy to get back into a preferred job on return from a temporary assignment. Fortuitously, one of the temporary relocations had led to a further permanent promotion in the local area. He was under no illusions that the company was just interested in getting the job done well. He received no support and dealt with problems alone.

Cliff had built a career over time with the company, but based upon adaptation to, rather than identification with, the company. He made extensive use of formal part-time education opportunities early on while developing his technical career, but since then a succession of managerial jobs, including temporary assignments, had provided plenty of opportunities for learning while working, extending and broadening his skills and knowledge base. Cliff had made a conscious decision not to engage with his work in a way that would maximise the likelihood he would be promoted. No 'extra' effort was put into either work activities or interactions. Although he worked hard, this had still created tensions with his manager. This constrained commitment, coupled with a critical understanding of how the company 'used' people, meant Cliff's sense of identity was strongly family-oriented rather than work-based. Additionally, Cliff did not want to undertake any additional learning and

development activities above the minimum necessary to do his work effectively, even though this made him dependent upon the company since he knew he would struggle to find another job with the same level and status. Then again, work was not a central life interest, with Cliff feeling that he would be able to cope with any change in status. This constrained commitment and incremental up-skilling meant that Cliff had not used potential opportunities as a platform for further learning and development. The next case provides a contrast to this approach by illustrating how some older workers engage intensively in re-skilling.

INTENSIVE RE-SKILLING

Up-skilling involves individuals' remaining within a single occupation, or following clearly signposted progression paths from a particular occupation - as illustrated in the two cases presented above. Some older workers, however, may have already embarked upon, or are seeking, a major career change, that involves re-skilling (that is, the development of skill sets different from those they already possess). Intensive re-skilling usually involves a major career re-orientation. Often, this requires considerable personal commitment, with either a major shift in identity or a recasting of current identities.

Sally is in her late forties and works as a production manager in a car components factory. Although she is only a few years younger than Cliff, she represents a stark contrast in her approach to work related learning. Sally did not become very purposeful about her own career development until after the age of 30. Initially, she completed a Sports Science degree, worked in outdoor pursuits for a year and then trained as a PE teacher. However, her teaching career lasted less than a year: 'I discovered I didn't like kids!' Next, she worked in a local authority leisure facility for five years. On leaving that post, she planned to live abroad, but this did not work out. She needed work, so took temporary office jobs for a couple of years. One of these jobs was with a small automotive components manufacturer. She took the job because she needed the work and it seemed to be a reasonable company.

Starting as a temporary clerical worker, Sally soon got a permanent job, in 'customer scheduling', calculating and costing customers' requirements, keeping track of what was being produced and what had been dispatched. Sally worked in this department for three years, but found the work undemanding as it was not utilising all her skills, nor giving her the type of challenge or responsibility for which she felt ready. She was, however, good at her job and was soon promoted to 'Head of Logistics', managing six clerical staff. Then in her mid thirties, she had not had any formal work-related education or training, having acquired the relevant work process knowledge from the work itself. Her work activities and interactions were still not personally challenging, but she determined to use this opportunity to start to build a career. No company training had been forthcoming, despite the promotion to a supervisory role. So she embarked on a self-directed approach to her own learning and development. At her own instigation, she asked to go to the Head Office (in

Germany) for a two-week period to orientate herself to the work of the company as a whole. She was given the time, but left to structure her own programme. Walking around the factory, talking to people helped her to find out what was being done, by whom and for what reasons.

Sally was quickly promoted twice - first to logistics specialist and then to Production Manager for a major customer group, with responsibility for resourcing the production and delivery of orders. Even though her (then) bosses encouraged her to apply for these posts, she experienced problems: 'I encountered huge difficulties as I had no knowledge of engineering production whatsoever. I knew nothing of production planning or engineering prioritising. Nothing!' Her first new post involved managing 100 permanent, mostly full-time, staff on a three shift system, plus seven support staff based in the office. She ordered and controlled all materials, as well as having responsibility for the production process itself, staff management and customer liaison. The challenges of the new job were considerable. Sally had had no substantive training relevant to her new job: 'My skills acquisition at this time was mainly on-the-job; finding out as I went along.' On her own initiative, she had enrolled for two evening classes: one on the Japanese view of the auto industry; the other on leadership and self-management.

The company did, eventually, provide training opportunities to help her cope with her new responsibilities, and as she began to 'get a handle' on her job she decided to do an Engineering Masters degree to give her a greater understanding of the technical underpinning of her management role: 'I wanted to understand what lay beneath what I was seeing on the shop floor and what I was controlling in my job.' The company paid for the course and much of what she learned was relevant at three levels - business, technical and operational. She had now fully grown into the job as a production manager.

When Sally reflects on her career she says: 'My career has gone every which way. It has gone differently to what might have been expected. I think there was a lot of luck involved in finding myself as a temp at my present company - being in the right place at the right time.' She is very satisfied with her salary and enjoys her job, although there are frustrations linked to working in what is still a man's world. 'It's not so much a glass ceiling as a huge steel ceiling!' If it had not been for gender prejudice, she felt she could have done much more. Indeed, the prevailing environment continues to constrain her: 'I find myself coping with it by taking on some of the male attitudes, and this makes me feel guilty. I think I confront it with aggressive behaviour, and people don't always understand why this is happening.'

Sally had never expected to enter the engineering world. 'The last place I wanted to work was a factory (...),but what I have come to realise is that it doesn't much matter what the workplace is, or where it is, or what it makes. Most of the processes for getting something resourced, produced and delivered are the same.' She is still looking to develop her skills: maybe in assertiveness to deal with the gender problem: 'some influencing skills training is probably what I need.' She also wants to

follow-up on work she did on the Masters around leadership and dealing with frustration: 'I need to learn how to deal with getting shouted down if I confront issues around gender discrimination.'

For the last ten years, Sally has been very proactive in building her career. She has exhibited a powerful commitment to re-skilling, intensively, when presented with new challenges and has achieved a great deal. However, she would not have wanted to have missed doing Sports Science, being at university and working in the leisure industry. Sally's approach to learning and development made use of learning while working, major education-based technical training, taking formal training opportunities and being self-directed in seeking out other learning opportunities. In this case, although work activities, interactions and identity were strongly in alignment, these were being held together by a strong sense of personal agency in pulling everything together and driving her career forward. To return, briefly, to a comparison with Cliff, it is interesting that a mid-career change had given Sally an enthusiasm to drive her career forwards, while at more or less the same age, after over thirty years in the same industry, Cliff was seeking to wind his career down.

INCREMENTAL RE-SKILLING OVER A LONG PERIOD

Some older workers had changed career frequently. Here, re-skilling typically occurred more incrementally, particularly where an individual is developing a career strategically, with a strong attachment to their own development. One example of this was Edward, who graduated in engineering and worked for an engineering company, but then moved every five years or so. These moves were into different areas that required the development of different skill sets: contract electronics, technical management, supply chain development and general management. They also required Edward to work in a wide range of different organisational contexts.

Edward was in his early fifties. He had completed an engineering degree and was sponsored while at university by a large company for which he then worked for seven years. He was involved in a range of project work, also undertaking a manufacturing management conversion programme for engineers. Then he returned to another division to a job in logistics and supply chain management. Edward, however, had become increasingly interested in electronics and decided, strategically, that he wanted to work in the expanding electronics industry. He worked in contract electronics for a couple of years, learning while working on different contracts in a variety of different settings. One of the contracts involved working with a global IT company and eventually he moved with the contract as the company took the work in-house. He stayed for two years, and then joined a large company as a supply chain manager with. The company expanded considerably through mergers and acquisitions and, initially his IT expertise, coupled with his proven ability in business development and experience of leading project teams, had been rather rare. However, since then (partly as a consequence of rationalisations following mergers) the standards of the company had gone up. He had been told: 'You're working with some very, very

capable people, very motivated people, and you have to work hard to keep ahead or to keep up to them. This is a competitive environment.'

Edward was highly committed to his work and regarded the company as a 'very good employer, a good company to work for, I enjoy working here and they reward you well.' He transferred to London, where his work involved being part of specially formed project teams with an international remit. He increased his experience in areas that were business oriented, rather than technical, although he recognised he has much less international market experience than others in the commercial field. On the technical operations side, Edward had gone as far as he was likely to go, because his previous manager, who had 'sponsored his career development', had left the company. Politically, he was then 'badged as one of his men.'

Edward represents a classic example of a strategic careerist, with decisions to enter and exit a career in IT being taken for career-related reasons. His progression has also been strongly linked to a willingness to engage with learning in a wide variety of forms: formal education; self-directed learning; training; learning while working; and particularly learning through taking on new challenges. The re-skilling aspect of his career has been important, because on at least three occasions he consciously chose to follow a particular route, rather than follow a clear up-skilling path, as he judged that the latter would narrow his options.

Both types of predominantly work-based re-skilling, intensive or incremental, have a strategic dimension. Because the re-skilling of both Sally and Edward was occurring from a base of high level performance in their current work, with their new skill sets in great demand, the re-skilling was relatively risk-free. In contrast, major career change for older workers that requires a disjunction from existing employment represents a challenge of a different order. Where demand for existing skill sets changes and/ or there is a degree of prejudice against older workers, then individuals who have become, for whatever reason, disengaged from work-related learning and development for a significant period of time are in a vulnerable labour market position. This is the type of the case we will now examine.

DISENGAGEMENT

John, in his mid 50s, left school at 16 with good qualifications. He then completed a telecommunications technician apprentice with a major telecommunications company and worked as a telecommunications engineer for just over a year. He was then offered a job with another major 'blue chip' company, this time in the growing IT industry. His new skill set was in demand and he was very well paid. A decade after leaving school, in his mid twenties, he was more highly paid than many graduates.

John's career initially went very well. He learned through a mixture of on the job learning and short periods of company-specific training. He became a senior engineer, working from a service centre. A couple of years later, however, the company decided

to withdraw from offering support services in favour of independent contractors. So John then worked for the company as a trainer of these new independent contractors: 'I suppose I was really working myself out of a job.' At this time, he demonstrated a strong organisational identity, shown by his willingness to move over to a training role and an expectation that the company would find him new employment.

When the company closed down the service centre he was offered either relocation to the head office or a fairly generous redundancy package. He chose the latter because he did not want to relocate for family reasons and he thought he would find alternative employment reasonably quickly, even if not at his previous salary level. In fact, it proved very difficult for John to get another job: 'although I was only just 40, and there quite a lot of jobs advertised, many employers thought I was too old for work in IT.' In a discussion of older workers' employment transitions, John's case is interesting, since he was considered 'too old', just after he reached 40 and despite reasonably high levels of initial skills training and continuing professional development. Subsequently, his career spiralled downwards and he became progressively more disengaged from any attempt to return to highly skilled work.

Eventually he was able to find work with the computing services arm of a large entertainment conglomerate. The work was not attractive, repairing computerised systems in pubs and clubs, and the salary was half what he had earned previously. 'It was 10.30 p.m. one New Year's Eve and I was working repairing a computerised till in a pub miles from home. It was hot, noisy and crowded, and there were strobe lights flashing while I was trying to solder a connection, and I was supposed to be at a party somewhere else and I suddenly thought: I've had enough of this!' John was disillusioned, so quit this line of work altogether. His company pension was at a level that meant he only had to do some work to top this up to a level on which he could live and 'give myself enough time to go fishing.'

From this time on, John did not feel he had an active occupational identity: he simply saw himself as a 'former computer maintenance technician.' John's commitment to work had been quite high, but learning at work was only ever directly linked to the evolving job. When the structure of work activities initially changed, he was able to develop 'bridging skills' that enabled him to train other people for a couple of years. Then came the complete break from his former work and as soon as he was no longer linked to the organisation, he had no further engagement with substantive work-related learning and development. After a spell out of work, he tried to continue in the role of computer maintenance technician in a different context. However, by this time the status, pay, conditions and most importantly the nature of the work had all changed fundamentally. The skill element had declined significantly, as computers had become much more reliable and technological change so rapid that if anything major went wrong it was almost always cheaper and more effective to replace it. He was then working in a maintenance role. His skills set was declining, and his work commitment and identity were becoming eroded.

Subsequently, he had other jobs, but these did not make any use of his technical skills or knowledge. He had worked as a taxi driver, mainly at night, in the suburbs of London. The work was challenging in a completely different way from the early part of his career: 'It was very high stress - you could have a fight every night if you wanted.' He also worked part-time as a fork-lift truck driver – his major reason for choosing the work being that it was local. He was effectively semi-retired in his early fifties. Personal circumstances, age discrimination and being tied to a particular geographical location made it very difficult for John to recover from a major career set-back. From then on work was always about short-term adaptation rather than identification, and other events in his life reinforced a feeling that you had to 'make do the best you can in the face of events you cannot control.'

Where demand for existing skill sets changes and/ or there is a degree of prejudice against older workers then individuals who have become, for whatever reason, disengaged from work-related learning and development for a significant period of time are in a vulnerable labour market position. This is the territory explored by Sennett (1998): there is an initial high commitment to work with a large company; but the major form of engagement with learning is through learning at work, with the expectation that the company will look after you. However, when circumstances change individuals can find themselves locked into work identities in decline. Then both work identity and work commitment start to slip away.

DISCUSSION

Like all workers, those over 45 may be faced with changes in the patterns of employment, transformation of some occupations and changes in the organisation of work. For some, their work may remain essentially the same, with the extent of change easily accommodated within normal patterns of learning while working. For others, even though their work changes considerably, this might be easily accommodated by means traditional to the organisation or occupation, particularly if the job itself requires considerable learning while working. For a third group whose careers develop with increasing responsibility and challenge then engaging in substantive learning is a central component of their career. Problems are most likely to arise in two particular contexts. First, when demands at work change suddenly after a long period of relative stability and workers feel they have not engaged in substantive learning for some considerable time. Secondly, learning new skills can seem challenging when workers are faced with a major career transition, particularly if they are not in work or are about to be made redundant.

Most of exemplary cases discussed and the wider set of biographies repeatedly demonstrated the value of learning while working in helping individuals keep their skills, knowledge and competences up-to-date and maintain a positive disposition towards learning. Access to opportunities for learning and development emerged as important. To some extent, these opportunities were more likely to be made available to individuals showing a strong commitment to work. However, it was also clear that

some individuals were much more pro-active than others in taking advantage of these opportunities. Further, those who were pro-active in this sphere seemed more likely to take advantage of other learning opportunities. Even those who had not engaged in much substantive learning for some time could find that when they were involved in substantive learning and development, this often acted as a spur to a transformation in how they perceived themselves and what they believed they could do.

From our research, issues around the capacities and potential of older workers because of their age never arose directly, although reasons for reduced capacity were sometimes health-related. Many respondents were active in their own learning and development, although this was easiest if directly linked to learning while working. There are still, however, issues around cultural norms and values with a number of participants commenting that it could be difficult to recover from a career set-back because of the perceptions of others that older workers could not adapt so easily as younger workers. Most of our interviewees had 'successful careers', but even some of them pointed out that it was possible to find your skills were no longer in demand and that with increasing age it became more difficult to overcome a career setback.

Many workers also exhibited a strong sense of attachment to their work, although others had found it was possible to continue in work as a form of short-term or long-term adjustment. In most circumstances, strong attachment to work brings considerable benefits, including a sense of career stability and having a career 'anchor'. However, there is the question as to whether a strong commitment to work also acts to hold individuals in 'chains', preventing them from attempting an appropriate career transition until it becomes more and more difficult to achieve. One way of considering an occupational identity, to which we are adjusted and that is relatively stable over a period of time, is as a psychological 'home'. 'Home' in this context is a "familiar environment, a place where we know our way around, and above all, where we feel secure" (Abhaya 1997: 2). Viewed in this way it is easy to understand the sense of loss and dislocation that people may feel when they are made redundant, with little prospect of regaining their former occupational identity (Sennett 1998). On the other hand, religion, literature and film abound with stories of people 'breaking free' and "loosening attachments to 'homes' of many kinds, be they psychological, social or ideological" (Abhaya 1997: 2). In this sense, after a period of stability, an occupational identity may come to be viewed as a confinement from which the individual longs to escape. That is, what is initially experienced as interesting and exciting may, with the passage of time, lead to "a sense of profound dissatisfaction with the comfortable limits" (Abhaya 1997: 8) of the existing way of life.

Dewey (1916) saw an occupation as giving direction to life activities and as a concrete representation of continuity: a 'home' with clear psychological, social and ideological 'anchors'. What should be of concern is the process for some individuals where the 'anchors' become progressively perceived as 'chains' that hold individuals close to their current roles, even if these are in decline. Interestingly, a strong

attachment to a current work role could act as a career ‘anchor’ from which it was possible for individuals to continue their career development (e.g. through their willingness to engage in ‘upskilling’ activities). However, where attachment was acting more as a ‘chain’ it often required an external stimulus such as a guidance intervention to help individuals to manage their career transitions, in some cases by viewing aspects of their current skill sets as ‘anchors’ that could be taken with them on a journey and utilised in a new setting, even if other aspects of their occupational or organisational identities were left behind.

The exemplary cases highlight how individuals are actors who shape important aspects of their own occupational trajectories and careers, with many individuals taking an active role as coordinators of their personal work biographies. A five year complementary longitudinal study into the career transitions of adults indicate how older workers’ biographies often involved elements of growth, learning, recovery or development as individuals moved between images of what they were, had been in the past or thought they might become, thereby emphasising biographical continuity (Bimrose *et al.* 2006; Bimrose and Barnes 2007). While major dislocations in individual careers could obviously be traumatic, where individuals had been able to construct coherent career narratives and ‘move on’, this had proved to be psychologically valuable. Career guidance often played an important role in that process.

From the research findings, there are clear indications for policy direction in the future. For example, policy could encourage individuals to engage in mid-career learning and development and give individuals the right to independent careers guidance after working for twenty years in order to help them develop coherent career narratives that may help them thrive rather than just survive in what may be a further twenty years of work. Additionally, workplaces and educational institutions could consider how best they can effectively support older workers’ learning, development and work transitions. This could include identifying appropriate learning strategies and pedagogic practices that will assist the development and maintenance of older workers’ capacities for working, learning, development and transitions. There is also a case for identifying good practice in policy measures, workplace practices and educational programmes in support of the continuing development of older workers’ workplace competence and learning dispositions. Finally, the right to a ‘career break’ of say six months to be taken at any time after twenty five years in work would support and encourage adults to remain active in managing their own career development.

The five cases outlined exemplify different patterns of behaviour in the development of work-related learning, careers and identities. The relationship between individuals and their work-related roles were represented as patterns of strategic action in their patterns of relationships, orientation and adaptive response to work. Two dimensions of individuals’ response to challenges of development of their learning, careers and identities were apparent from their narrative biographies: attachment to

work and the nature of the opportunities they had for, and their approach to, learning and development. Interestingly a strong attachment, or adjustment, to a current work role could act as a career ‘anchor’ from which it was possible for individuals to continue their career development (e.g. through willingness to engage in ‘up-skilling’) or else as a ‘chain’ that restricted their perceived freedom of action (e.g. through unwillingness to engage in substantive ‘up-skilling’ or ‘re-skilling’). Complementary research evidence provides a strong indication that guidance can help individuals manage career transitions by helping clients view their current skill sets as ‘anchors’ that can be taken with them on a journey and utilised in a new setting, rather than as ‘chains’ that hold them close to their current roles (Bimrose *et al.* 2006; Bimrose and Barnes 2007).

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