

MIDLIFE IN A CHANGING AND POST-PANDEMIC WORLD. IMPLICATIONS FOR CAREER EDUCATION AND OLDER ADULT LEARNING USING ON-LINE AND IN PERSON SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

The present study addresses processes and tools for adult career guidance in the context of longer lives. The need for people in midlife to prepare for their remaining working lives is more urgent since the global pandemic, making demands on career and adult educators. Older workers and job-seekers, especially those with lower levels of prior education, face difficulties if employers discriminate against them or discount their skills and abilities, especially in low skilled sectors. An Erasmus Plus project's results are discussed, demonstrating the benefits of online approaches to support employability, highlighting whether older workers could gain from using online and peer supported tools.

Keywords

midlife skills review; lifelong learning; career adaptability; transferable skills; e-learning; user experience

Introduction - Setting the scene

„Preparing for and smoothing the path of the aging workforce of the future should be one of our leading priorities” (Coleman 2015).

This paper presents applied and practical experience in developing tools for career guidance, backed by a wealth of empirical research. This brief introduction offers reflections on some of the key concepts and trends.

Firstly, long-term demographic changes mean an ageing population. This calls into question what we mean by ‘old’. Chronological age is convenient for statistics and bureaucracy, but occludes massive variation in physical conditions and social circumstances. Should we use length of working life, as they do to an extent in France? Or might we refer instead to biological clocks to measure out age? One consequence of simple dividing lines based on chronological age is that our knowledge base is sadly inadequate. Most labour market data ceases after age 65, and our analyses and conclusions are constrained by this lack.

Secondly, population ageing is not only about greater numbers of older people. It affects all age groups in terms of their incomes and taxes but also in their relations to those older and

younger than themselves. In other words, ageing is relational as well as personal. This means that employment and careers have to be seen against fluctuating personal contexts. Two particular aspects of this are the proliferation of caring responsibilities of different kinds; and increasing inequalities across generations. Longer lives mean greater disparities of wealth and wellbeing, unless action is taken.

Thirdly, we are used to hearing about the end of the “job for life”; but possibly more significant is the need to rethink careers in response to changing models of the life course as a whole. Thus it is not so much a matter of people switching jobs more often, or even of changing occupations or sectors, but of moving in and out of different employment categories: full-time and part-time; paid, voluntary or unpaid; with an upward or downward trajectory in terms of income or status. This obviously has a strong gender dimension, which is still underplayed: such mixed patterns are ones that women have historically experienced and which still foster inequalities (Schuller 2017, Goldin 2021). It is, possibly, one upside of the pandemic that it has given a massive shake to the dominant model of continuous full-time employment. That said, the binary full-time vs part-time divide is arguably still a massive obstruction to achieving more person-centred career structures.

How to move away from a linear life course model, to one (or more) that can encompass the dynamic quality of most people’s trajectories, including the possibility of returning to previous statuses or conditions (so-called “unretirement”)? One option is to pay more attention in our conceptual thinking to the interactions between the biological, the psychological and the socio-cultural strands of personal development. Such a biopsychosocial model is known in medicine, but hardly used in social science. The image or metaphor of a “triple helix”, with these three strands winding round each other, might help us towards more effective and socially meaningful applications of career guidance. As Matthew D’Ancona says: “*We need to see the new shape of a human life, its extended duration and what its different phases mean through new lenses. The longer we resist that all-important shift, the more trouble we shall be storing up for ourselves*” (2022, p. 228).

Against this background, the purpose of this study is to provide valuable comparative insights into different approaches to careers support, and especially skills reviews, and to highlight the contribution of the innovative digital tool, Value My Skills, in supporting older workers to be aware of the skills gained through life and work experience so that they can reorient or adapt their career and flourish.

The mid-life skills review projects

To explore one aspect of the labour market and social justice in relation to older people, a series of projects examined support for learners in midlife, both employed and unemployed. Firstly, Midlife Career Review (UK 2010-2014) trialled approaches with 3,000 participants. Subsequently an Erasmus Plus project, Midlife Skills Review (MLSR) expanded a peer mentoring tool, Value My Skills (VMS) (Unionlearn, n.d.), with an online version in 8 languages. A further Erasmus Plus project (EMLSR) introduces on-line support and job-matching. Midlife support for workers should challenge the barriers that older people face and consider both a contested policy context and some contradictory practice.

The MLSR project, launched in 2019, focused on reviewing skills and competences and was targeted at adults aged 50 plus with low levels of basic skills in numeracy and digital literacy. Its main goal was to develop innovative skills, self-assessment tools for adult workers and in situations of risk of unemployment. In particular, the project produced innovative outputs available online for all the users, including: new online training modules for Midlife Skills Reviewers (peer mentors); new skills assessment tools for use with the older workers; and, new badging materials for recognizing and validating learning. The EMLSR aims to enrich the tool

with new digital solutions. and here, we reflect on the benefits of VMS in particular to review the skills of midlife employees to support their employability in challenging times.

European midlife workers in the post - Covid 19 era

The Covid 19 pandemic increased the disruptions long-since experienced by the European labour market, including extra precarity for workers over 50. Issues such as demographic change with a progressively ageing population, declining youth employment, emigration (e.g., Romania) /immigration (e.g., UK/Italy), increased retirement ages and technological changes, all call for upskilling and/or reskilling of midlife employees. Older workers already faced discrimination at work and struggled to find decent jobs, while the risk of old-age poverty remains. To respond to current challenges, governments need to rebuild resilient economies, including labour market processes.

Workers aged 50+ in context

Workers in midlife are assumed to be aged 50+; typically, workers in this age group have not participated recently in workplace training or in lifelong learning (L&W 2021). Career guidance is not often available to the older workforce and even retirement advice is sparse. Individuals in midlife have not typically focused on retraining as a priority (McNair 2012, NIACE 2015, L&W 2021); there are many other claims on their time. With the pressure to prolong working life led by rising state pension ages across Europe, workers need to find ways to ensure that they can stay in employment just as employers require their services at a time of demographic change.

The situation facing 50+ workers in project partner countries (Finland, Italy, Romania, Spain, UK) varies and can appear somewhat contradictory including as it does: higher than expected early retirement alongside prolonged working lives and rising pension ages; the need for new skills combined with an absence of training opportunities; jobs becoming redundant; or, the prevalence of inflexible working. Personal circumstances also change, including: new caring responsibilities; financial difficulties; ill-health; and, the need for flexibility. Real and perceived age discrimination is also a factor in retaining or gaining work or learning (Dello Russo et al., 2020; PwC, 2021). Older workers and job-seekers face particular difficulties if employers discriminate against them or discount their skills and abilities which is especially the case if older workers are 'low-skilled', have lower levels of prior education, and/or are in categories facing discrimination in the labor market (such as gender and race).

The demographic and socio-economic landscape

The impact of demographic change in Europe is significant and includes ageing, youth, migration, new refugees, and more recently the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (EC, 2019). The labour market is further impacted by the war in Ukraine and the cost of living crisis.

As a response to larger ageing populations most countries across Europe are gradually increasing (state) pension ages and/or retirement ages, some of which are compulsory (LiC, 2021).

The Covid 19 health, social and economic crisis affects the labour market and is not over (Evans, 2022). It is reflected by the rates of employment, unemployment, long-term unemployment, and individuals unwilling to return to work, with some regions/countries and economic sectors (e.g. manufacturing, travel, care) affected more than others according to differing development and policies (OECD, 2021a; ILO, 2022a). The rate of jobs forced to move online impacted workers unevenly hitting especially those already vulnerable. Workers with lower levels of education/qualification/digital skills and low paid occupations are the most

affected for being unable to work online. Accelerated technological change deepens the digital divide on the labour market (ILO, 2022a). As OECD (2021a) points out, the recovery is fragile varying across countries and strongly depending on the coordinated actions of the stakeholders and policy decision makers. Considering the need for reskilling and upskilling the “Reskilling Revolution” stated that *“the pandemic has accelerated the need for change, by disrupting economic activity and fast-tracking automation and digitization, creating both devastation across labour markets and new opportunities for online learning, redeployment and reemployment”* (WEF, 2022).

The Covid-19 crisis increased demand for and delivery of career guidance which switched to online services. Thus, the rise in a need for upskilling and reskilling, due to jobs lost or worker reallocation in the pandemic, made career guidance a central pillar of “build back better” (OECD, 2022a).

Lifelong Learning for midlife workers

Though the significance of lifelong learning (LLL) is fully acknowledged, access to it is unevenly distributed across and within the EU countries with those most in need often having least opportunity. LLL policies may not be reflected in practice; in 2020 the participation rate of adults in lifelong learning dropped by 1.6 percentage points compared with 2019 (Eurostat, 2021). For example, Romania had the lowest rate of participation in the EU with 1% of adults (aged 25-64) in education and training in 2020, thus failing by far to reach its own objective of achieving 10% (EURYDICE, 2021). However, as the data¹ show, the participation raised considerably in the second year of the pandemic to 4.9% for age group 25-64 and from 0.3 in 2019 to 2.3 in 2021 for age group 55-64, but still low if compared with Italy’s 9.9% for age 25-64, and 6.1% for age 54-64 in 2021. L&W (2021) reports even higher rates for the UK, with a quarter of adults participating in learning in 2021 (of whom 33% are 55-64). This rise in participation may relate to the coronavirus pandemic as people reflected on their work and career goals and/or develop new interests (L&W, 2021). However, participation rates drop with age. In our project we refer to low-skilled 50+ workers as the most vulnerable and likely to need training/retraining to remain employable and extend their working lives².

Career guidance for older workers

Access to career guidance for older people across Europe varies considerably. State and private provision may exist but public provision tends to be focused on worklessness and not on mid-career transitions. However, in the current contexts we find that particularly lower-skilled workers are more likely to have to change jobs and less likely to receive any workplace support for doing so and would lack the means to take advantage of private provision such as coaching.

Older workers face a range of barriers in accessing any guidance services which do exist and equally in finding appropriate retraining or upskilling. Appropriate digital tools for career guidance support can offer a way through this minefield (OECD, 2021b).

Peer mentoring, brokered by social partners, can be an important way for some workers to access support and onward referral. The project’s VMS Tool for career guidance offers flexible use (it can be completed by the worker or with mentor/coach support), motivating change through self-evaluation and reflection, and connecting to ESCO³ skills, tailored action

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TRNG_LFSE_01__custom_3144613/default/table?lang=en

² <https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/european-mid-life-skills-review-project>

³ <https://esco.ec.europa.eu/>

plans and learning materials.

Career adaptability

In developing the tools, the projects have drawn on a range of career development theories including career construction theory (Savickas, 2002). Although much cited by practitioners, the implications of these theories on practice, run somewhat counter to much current policy and practice in career guidance as carried out in job centres or career agencies, which, as examples from the projects show, may tend to be insufficiently person-centred or enabling of older people who are in low-skilled and/or low paid employment or who are long-term unemployed. While practitioners are generally trained in personalized methods, current resourcing and funding does not always enable the utilization of the most supportive practices (Bimrose & Brown, 2015).

The MLSR projects utilize the concept of career adaptability (Bimrose & Brown, 2015; Savickas, 2002) alongside an approach based on person-centred guidance. The Career Review project specifically looked at a “holistic” approach where career was assumed to encompass the whole life and life course where the review focused on all aspects of later life including paid work.

Brown, Bimrose et al. (2012) use the notion of learning and development pathways based on Savickas (2019) and add Concern as a fifth concept to his list of four: Control, Curiosity, Commitment and Confidence. Brown and Bimrose’s research was carried out with higher skilled individuals and doesn’t include enough on context, systematic issues, labour market conditions for the low-skilled groups. Rudolph et al. (2018) show the ongoing development of Savickas’ theory to which we add our own findings. Therefore, in the EMLSR project we have added two proposed concepts: Capability⁴ and Context⁵.

The Contribution of Value My Skills as a digital tool to reshape Older Workers’ Careers

The following section describes the contribution of an innovative digital tool designed to support older workers to build their career adaptability, Value My Skills. The tool is designed to bring change theories into digital solutions and aims to give users a roadmap for developing their skills, with a focus on encouraging them to explore a wide variety of job opportunities, matching the skills they possess, increasing an understanding of transferable skills and allowing access to resources that can support them.

We highlight the contribution in terms of benefits and risks mitigation that the tool can provide to lower skilled workers enabling them to assess their skills and successfully make a change.

The Value My Skills Tool - case study

In order to respond to complex challenges for older workers in current and future labour market landscapes, the EU consortium worked to develop an enhanced version of Value My Skills analogue card game by using a project partner’s⁶ experience in creating digital solutions which enable lasting behaviour change.

Value My Skills is a digital tool that results from the research activities of the consortium on how to support users in planning their career starting from a process of self-

⁴ added by Saffron Interactive in a previous project

⁵ added by Jane Watts, National Learning and Work Institute, for this project

⁶ Saffron Interactive

assessment of individual skills. The tool has an interface, accessible from an online platform, which provides individuals with continual opportunities to reassess their skills, update their career aspirations and create an action plan of educational and training activities all of which aim to support them in achieving new personal and professional goals. The user journey can be structured into key sections: Mentoring, Skills assessment, Skills mapping, Career matching, and Action plan. We give a brief overview of each section below.

Overview of the VMS user journey

Anya: Mentor/assistant

Coaching and mentoring has been shown to yield a better outcome than an individual trying to get to the same place on their own, so the tool introduces a mentor character to assist users in their journey. Anya was chosen to assist those that could use the digital tool alone, but the tool can be used with the support of an actual human mentor.

Skills assessment

The user works through a dynamic card-based skills assessment diagnostic. This encourages the individual to reflect on their transferable skillset and offers recognition of the value of the skills and experiences that they have gained throughout life, in the world of work and beyond.

Skills mapping and Career matching

The VMS tool provides information relating to career opportunities. A specific feature has been developed to define the professional profiles that can be reached by users. This allows users to assess whether their skills match those needed and required by the labour market for certain occupations. This is done by linking skills with the European ESCO skills classification system. The user can assess the need to upgrade skills and plan a new professional path.

To match the users' skills with labour market's demand the project defined a method of mapping. The process is based on the analysis of labour market data, in particular on online job vacancies that ensure the real demand for skills by labour market. Only skills for mid-level occupations have been considered. The skills described in the cards are linked through a semantic mapping to the ESCO skills. The mapping is based on a metric of the similarity between texts. Once the ESCO skills have been extracted, their relevance in the labour market is calculated and users can see which occupations are sought needing those skills.

Action planning and dynamic dashboard

Following the mapping process, the user is presented with personalized career recommendations, categorized into job families. They can quickly see the skills they have and some careers they might suit. The "pin" functionality allows the users to save careers and skills they are interested in exploring further. The action plan allows users to set objectives to ensure that they know how to follow through on their career aspirations. The user can use the opportunity to reflect on what they have achieved.

On-line tools and the midlife skills review projects - a reflection

"Trained, energetic would-be older workers are frustrated by a job market that fails to take full advantage of their talents". (Coleman, 2015)

It is frequently noted that the Covid 19 pandemic has exacerbated problems already emerging within the European labour market, notably in the case of our study, that of the

increasingly precarious status of older workers and their fair and equitable access to opportunities for training and progression at work. These are issues to be resolved by older workers, policy makers and employers.

Demographic change was long anticipated, but poorly prepared for and now means later state pension ages. The cost of living crisis is further delaying retirement for some, while, post-pandemic, some 50+ people have left work even earlier; this contradiction has led to the notion of “unretirement”, that is, returning to paid work after “retiring”.

However, research shows, and our findings concur, that the current labour market is failing older workers ahead of retirement. In the UK, for example, research has revealed that many 65 year olds lost out financially when the state pension age rose to 66, including older workers still in employment (CfAB, 2022a). The exodus of experienced workers from the UK job market continues (CfAB, 2022b). There is still a significant gap to pre-pandemic levels of employment of older workers, despite a successful return for other age groups. Nearly 3.5 million people aged 50 - 64 are economically inactive; 230,000 more than before the pandemic.

Older women are especially badly affected by the pandemic (Age UK 19/7/22. Lanbide, 2022). The number of working women in the UK aged 65+ has fallen sharply since the start of pandemic in contrast to a healthy rise in the number of older working men (Lowe 20/7/22) and this is replicated in the Basque country (Lanbide, 2022). Older women across many European countries face further barriers when it comes to training (Lösslbroek & Radl, 2018).

Industry research suggests that “baby boomers” are “pushed” into retirement despite wanting to work longer (Dunstan Thomas, 2022). Lower educated workers are more likely to be pushed into involuntary early exit (Mäcken et al., 2021). Governmental responses vary as, for example, the UK government has acknowledged the new difficulties by expanding its Midlife MOT platform with the intention of helping people access work, wellbeing and finances (UK Govt. July 2022).

Employers can help with the retention and support of older workers. Resources have been published to support employers (e.g. CfAB 2020, 2021) which would work well alongside the VMS (Unionlearn nd). Measures such as flexible working and carers leave are needed to help fill vacancies with older workers.

There is little sign of action, especially at policy level. Poverty in old age is not well-addressed across Europe; many people have inadequate savings and may not be able to retire from work when they reach the (new) state pension age. Some people are keen to continue in the workplace, but others may have no choice. Career guidance and upskilling opportunities are still too few. Lack of decent work across all age groups is a factor as is low pay. These factors continue into older age for many workers and in some cases worsen.

While EMLSR has demonstrated the usefulness of VMS, project partners understand the need for more. This kind of skills review is merely one starting point for a review or for making changes in midlife and planning for later life. While the VMS tool can stand alone and be carried out by someone on their own, the element of peer mentoring enhances the experience for many. Social partners, NGOs and others can enable peer mentoring while job centres or equivalent national organizations can support this process through career coaches. In the UK, union learning representatives can play this role.

For some people it is vital that the action plan they create in the VMS is expanded to include how to review other aspects of their life as well as how to take forward a retraining plan based on a skills review; this may need expert professional guidance and onward, accurate referral is therefore important. As noted above, not all adults can gain access to guidance services, and if they do, these services do not always reflect best practice which should include holistic and person-centred guidance including whole life review.

Key to skills review, and to resolving some of the issues around employability of older

workers is the concept of transferable skills, which remains much-mentioned but poorly understood. If individuals are to support their own self-improvement and if employers are to offer good work opportunities to older people in a changing labour market the approach of transferring skills must be clarified for everyone. Tools such as VMS can support this, especially if dialogue between the learner and peer mentor/coach is enabled.

Midlife reviews can also take place in workshops or in one-to-one sessions, with workshops having been found very valuable, especially by some less confident learners (Watts, 2015). Reviews must consider life beyond career so that action plans are realistic and commensurate with personal circumstances. The UK Government's introduction of an online mid-life MOT and its recent improvement offers a route which is acceptable and accessible for some people, but requires a high level understanding of personal circumstances and IT skills. This project finds that it is effective to site review in the context of learning or guidance opportunities, enhanced with the support of others/another to help those who most need support.

However, no matter how much "review" is carried out, if people want to stay in work, "decent" work need to be available. As long ago as 1995, while discussing the "new career contract", Hall and Mirvis suggested that the future, particularly for people in midlife and beyond, should include a broad approach to continuous learning, developing the whole person and therefore a different relationship with the employer which would include more self-management of the employment pathway, enabled by employers rather than a narrow, job-focused, functionalist approach. In our view, this would benefit the whole workforce and wider society and ensure that older workers remain included, utilizing their skills and experience gained from a whole lifetime of work and living. VMS might help someone to identify these skills and experiences, but they need the other side of this equation to operate in their favor.

Conclusions

Living longer, while a positive human achievement, does not always mean living well (Grattan & Smith, 2020). The concept of job for life has long gone, with workers experiencing frequent transitions and needing new skills throughout life, as changes such as automation have advanced rapidly. Improving the labour market with its challenges and underemployment of older workers remains a concern to which policy makers must be further alerted.

Finding appropriate learning/training opportunities in adult education provision remains a challenge which providers and policy makers need to address. Opportunities for good quality advice and guidance also remain poor.

This project contributes to research which supports lower-skilled workers remaining employable in the fast-evolving landscape of the labour market. Specifically, we have shown the value of the VMS digital tool designed to support workers to build their career adaptability, starting from a skill assessment process. The tool aims to give users a roadmap for developing their skills and motivate users to continue their development journey and build confidence and resilience. The guidance provided to users is designed to address the EU priority of enhancing the disparate provision and sometimes poor quality of adult education and training opportunities. The impact of VMS could be considerable on learners, and in general on Europe's economy where older workers will be enabled to remain in the workplace. The availability of the tool in several EU languages supports its dissemination.

The project's research found that a digital tool like the VMS could benefit employers in retaining their employees through upskilling, offering them targeted training/retraining opportunities and jobs. Such tools also support midlife employees to identify the skills accumulated over the lifespan that have the potential to help them keep or change their jobs or to support them in searching for opportunities for learning.

Further research is needed as is practical action. There has been much recent research,

in the UK, the EU and OECD, but there are gaps and particularly there is a continued absence of longitudinal data encompassing ages over 64 or sufficient policy and practice focus on midlife. It is clear that while labour markets are researched, there is too little addressing the career guidance of older workers and equally little on the retraining and upskilling needs of older adults.

It would be useful to take further the methods and tools from the projects and continuing to develop the holistic approaches trialled in these career and skill review projects. There is much more to be done if later life poverty is to be addressed.

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