

Advancing Older Workers: Motivations, Adaptabilities, and Ongoing Career Engagement

Jennifer Luke. University of Southern Queensland
Roberta A. Neault. Life Strategies Ltd

Abstract

There is international government, private sector, and not-for-profit interest in the aging workforce and how to retain or re-engage retirement-age workers to address skills gaps and strengthen productivity. Traditionally, however, the career development sector has paid relatively little attention to this demographic. Published Australian research (Luke, McIlveen, & Perera, 2016) has examined the motivations of individuals who have retired (or are considering it) to stay engaged or re-engage in the workforce. Grounded in developmental and constructivist career theories, this article provides an international (trans-Pacific) perspective on the value of older workers, how to meet their workplace needs and expectations, and what it will take for them to achieve and sustain an optimal level of career adaptability and career engagement. Analysis of vignettes based on interviews with post-retirement-age workers from the aforementioned published research, demonstrates how the career engagement model can provide a practical conceptual framework for influencing policy and supporting career decision-making and lifelong career management for this cohort.

An aging population is not isolated to individual countries. Globally, there are skills gaps within the workforce and an urgent need to regenerate these skills (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2017).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2015), the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2015), and the World Economic Forum (Jenkins, 2019) are all aware of a rapidly aging society with workforce productivity needing an injection of skills from older workers, including those in retirement.

This article provides a review of existing literature on an aging workforce and theoretical concepts within vocational psychology that present a foundation for proactive career strategies for older workers who have either remained within, or re-entered employment.

In successive Intergenerational Reports produced by the Australian Government's Treasury (2010, 2015), a changing demographic was acknowledged in response to Australian Bureau of Statistics data. This data indicated that Australian society is aging and, during the next decade, over a quarter of the population will be approaching retirement age while fewer younger people will be entering the labour market (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2016). Similarly, the Canadian government has also demonstrated an aging population driven by fertility rates below replacement level and increased life expectancy, accelerated by the large cohort of aging *baby boomers*, many of whom are delaying retirement (Statistics Canada, 2017, 2018). Australia and Canada have followed similar growth in their older (65+ age) workforce with both recording 13% participation rates in 2015 (Australian Institute of

Health and Welfare, 2018). With a growing mature-age workforce, this creates great opportunities for employers to first understand and then harness the wealth of knowledge and experience that this cohort of workers offer. Unfortunately, mature-aged job seekers still face many hurdles in today's highly competitive and fast-moving job market, including how to engage (or re-engage) successfully with a multigenerational workforce. Additionally, barriers can also include age discrimination in the workplace, relocation concerns, arranging flexible work schedules or necessary accommodations, and out-of-date job search skills (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2016; Government of Canada, 2016; Taylor & Lebo, 2019).

The authors' published research into the motivations and career adaptability of those in retirement seeking an encore career (Luke, McIlveen, & Perera, 2016) and career engagement (Neault & Pickerell, 2019; Pickerell & Neault, 2016, 2019) is used as the scaffold from which vignettes based on interviews conducted with retirees (Luke, McIlveen, & Perera, 2016) can be understood. Case analyses examine how the Career Engagement Model (Neault & Pickerell, 2019) can be an effective bridge between career counselling of older clients and employee engagement.

The trans-Pacific perspectives in this article, along with the literature review and previous international research findings, illustrate the global (ILO, 2015; OECD, 2015) nature of challenges associated with an aging

workforce. Understanding the future of work, employment, and employability, requires a perspective that is based within vocational psychology theory and research, to ensure policy and practices are informed (McIlveen, 2018). It is hoped that the theoretically grounded, contextualized career strategies offered here will inform both local and global policy as well as stimulate professional practice conversations about the value of older workers, their career development needs and search for meaningful work, as well as how to support their career engagement.

Literature Review

Due to the advances in science and technology, the demographics of countries are changing with their older populations living longer and continuing to learn and actively contribute to society (Casey & Gullo, 2019). Understanding the requirements and characteristics of workforce policies that target older workers has emerged in government discussions both in Australia (Taylor, Earl, & McLoughlin, 2016) and Canada (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2018; Government of Canada, 2016) as well as in many other countries (OECD, 2015), amid concerns about labour shortages and the increase of social welfare due to aging populations. Taylor (2019) cautioned, though, that a public policy focus on prolonging working lives might be detrimental for any older workers who experience low quality work as it can produce adverse consequences for a person's mental state. This is, of course, consistent with the argument that sustainable, decent work is a human right and source of well-being (Blustein, 2013).

This concern for the individual and their wellbeing is aligned

with Luke, McIlveen, and Perera (2016) who recommended that, in regards to integrating older workers, the focus must not be initially on policy but instead on the individual so as to understand what motivates a person in retirement to re-enter the workforce. Stating that retirement could no longer be conceptualised as the final stage of a person's career, this research made the first attempt to understand this phenomenon through the conceptual lens of the Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005) and its construct of career adaptability of individuals and understanding their unique narratives. According to Savickas, Career Construction Theory examines vocational personality types, the psychosocial adaption of how a person copes with vocational development tasks or transitions and also the reason for vocational behaviour (life themes).

Motivations to Re-Engage With Career

Before looking at national workforce capability solutions and how to encourage employers to recruit older workers, it is important to focus on the individual (Luke, McIlveen, & Perera, 2016). With an increasing older workforce (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018; Statistics Canada, 2017, 2018), the following questions are relevant to ask. What are the needs of older workers? Why are they looking for a career transition or change? If they are retirees, why do they want to re-enter the workforce?

In 2012, Schlosser, Zinni, and Armstrong-Stassen investigated the factors that influence a person of retirement age to either be pulled into full retirement or pushed back out into employment or *unretiring*. Based on survey data collected from 460 Ca-

nadian retirees, their research findings highlighted financial security, missing the professional social connections, or a wish to upgrade skills (lifelong learning) as reasons given for returning to work. The consideration of these pull factors regarding the decision of unretiring can also be related to an unemployment theory regarding well-being, known as the *deprivation perspective* (Jahoda, 1982).

Jahoda's (1982) focus on well-being and the latent benefit of personal identity in employment corresponds well to Sterner's (2012) observation that career transitions may cause an individual to feel the loss of a significant part of their identity, due to leaving the routine of their current stage in life. Super (1990) theorized that individuals go through different life stages and developmental tasks as part of their career decision-making process. The Life-Span, Life-Space (Super, 1990; Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996) developmental career model accommodates the various influences an individual encounters at different stages and roles within their life and can help researchers understand how a retiree's decision-making processes and self-belief in their abilities, impacts a decision to transition from retirement back to an employment stage (Pleau & Shauman, 2013).

Successful transition from one life stage to the next, as conceptualized by Super (1990), involves physical and psychological development issues such as a person's perception of themselves (i.e., self-concept). Blustein (2006), in his psychology-of-working perspective, added that the impact of institutional and social barriers (e.g., age, gender, race, and social class) must be also considered at each stage.

In research completed by the first author (Luke, McIlveen, & Perera, 2016) that investigated the motives

of retirees deciding to return to work, the highest ranking response (over 80%) from 17 individual retiree interviews (10 male, 7 female), was not financial reasons but, instead, the desire to stay active, have purpose, and be involved in meaningful work. Recent Dutch research that investigated preconditions and motives influencing work beyond retirement age (Sewdas et al, 2017) also highlighted similar findings; financial benefit was rarely mentioned by their retirement age participants as the sole reason for prolonging work participation – instead, health, work characteristics, skills and knowledge, plus social factors all rated high.

Individuals of all ages seek meaning from their various life and career roles in order to connect themselves into meaningful paths, where both their personal values and perceptions of mattering contribute to give purpose (Blustein, 2011). In the following section, we explore how this specifically plays out in older workers, asking, “How does an older worker engage (or re-engage) with career and effectively adapt in the face of challenges they may encounter during their search for meaningful work?”

Career Adaptability in Older Workers’ Career Transitioning

Research into later life employment pathways is dispersed across a range of disciplines including gerontology (van Solinge et al., 2017), organizational psychology (Rudolph, Rauvola, & Zacher, 2018), and human resources (Adams & Rau, 2004). A focus on actual vocational psychology based career development strategies for older workers and retirees re-entering the workforce is minimal. Van Loo’s (2011) research into older workers recommended that

career guidance and counselling needed to further expand in today’s world of work with a holistic approach focusing on self-management of career paths. Savickas’ (2012) notion of career adaptability can facilitate this self-management through a focus on resilience in the context of change and with individuals relying on self-regulatory processes and social resources in adapting to change.

Savickas (2005), in his Career Construction Theory, defined *career-adaptive* individuals as those who become concerned about their career futures, take increasing control over their vocational future, display curiosity about possible future selves and scenarios, as well as strengthen their confidence to pursue their career aspirations. When embedding the concept of career adaptability within Super’s Life-Span, Life-Space Theory, Savickas (1997) identified the concept of adaptability as the ability to alter, without great difficulty, as circumstances changed. Regarding career development, Savickas stated that such career adaptability provides an individual the readiness to cope with both the predictable tasks as well as unpredictable adjustments that will occur in work and working conditions.

The findings of initial research by Luke, McIlveen, and Perera (2016) regarding the motivations of retirees re-entering a career, provided recommendations for policy makers to first understand the importance of the self-efficacy and career adaptability of this cohort when providing opportunities for them within the workforce. The post-retirement age participants, interviewed about their motivations to re-enter career, expressed a concern for their future, displayed control with respect to keeping active and engaged, had curiosity to learn new skills and knowledge, and

were confident in knowing that they could make a positive contribution. Thus, the initial study (Luke, McIlveen, & Perera, 2016) highlighted that career adaptability (Savickas, 2005) was evident in adults not only in the early stages of the developmental life span but as a lifelong resource; this adaptability, therefore, is a relevant area of focus for career practitioners and policy makers. Exploring retirement from the perspective of Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005) was unusual; vocational psychology theories have predominantly focused on the career life span before Super’s (1980) final developmental life stage of disengagement. Finding evidence of career adaptability in those in post-retirement provided scope to continue a research focus in the conceptual extension of this stage of disengagement.

Many mature age jobseekers have worked in a particular industry for many years and have substantial knowledge and expertise. Assisting these job seekers with a career development approach that focuses on vocational development tasks (Super, 1980) provides opportunities for them to utilize and share these skills. Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth (2004) stressed the central role Savickas’ career adaptabilities played in a person’s employability. In subsequent related research, Fugate and Kinicki (2008) highlighted the importance of resiliency if one is to remain highly employable. Employability is also strengthened by an individual understanding their value to an employer, such as skills and knowledge previously gained from paid work and other life experiences (Luke, 2018).

Venter (2016) reinforced the need for effective communication between generations, advocating open-mindedness from all age groups and encouraging the older population

to be curious and identify opportunities to learn from the younger age groups rather than seeing them as threats. This can link back to individuals of any age being curious about learning activities associated with their occupational aspirations and deciding to take a proactive approach in controlling their career decisions (Savickas, 2012). Such career adaptabilities strengthen employability and provide stronger foundations for successful career engagement (Neault & Pickerell, 2019). Career *engagement*, as will be described below, is the antithesis of *disengagement* – the label Super (1990) used for his final stage of career development.

Career Engagement

The career engagement model (Neault & Pickerell, 2019; see Figure 1) is based upon a holistic notion of “career” comprising all significant life roles (i.e., one’s career may comprise paid and unpaid work, caregiving, studying, periods of unemployment, and participation in other roles, interconnected and constantly changing). Career engagement is conceptualized as an optimal fit between challenge and capacity, both individual and organizational/contextual. Generally, challenging activities are both meaningful and motivating. Capacity is influenced by such personal characteristics as skills, abilities, and wellbeing, but also by organizational or contextual factors such as budgets, time, equipment, staffing, supervision, and policies. With this in mind, it is not inevitable that aging workers would become disengaged and remove themselves from the workforce. Rather, integrating Super’s (1990) notion of career adaptability, it makes sense that by consciously re-aligning challenge and capacity, they could remain engaged and productive well

past the typical age of retirement. This can be illustrated in the following vignettes with individuals in their sixties and seventies, who participated in interviews conducted for the author’s previous study (Luke, McIlveen, & Perera, 2016). Within the career development sector, such lifelong engagement has been role modelled by several well-known thought leaders such as John Holland, John Krumboltz, Richard Bolles, and Donald Super, all of whom were working into their eighties and some into their nineties.

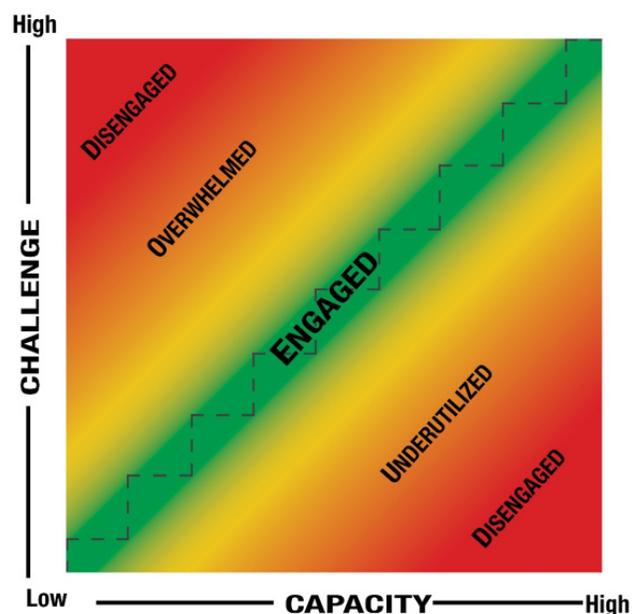
Strategies for Career Engagement

Case 1: Semi-Retired Industrial Chemist (78-year-old male)

Background. Jake (pseudonym) is a well-educated and highly qualified chemist and engineer, retired

after 45 years of professional experience. During his first three years after leaving his job in a large organization, Jake thoroughly enjoyed consulting to 20 to 30 diverse organizations, sharing his technical skills and expertise in management and marketing. He is still open to further consulting work but has begun to second-guess his ability to contribute. His concerns include lack of industry-specific knowledge beyond his own corporate setting and sector, as well as wondering whether “20 somethings” think he has any wisdom to offer. He is worried about tarnishing his positive professional reputation if he demonstrates any lack of understanding, recognizing that in a relatively small professional sector, word travels quickly if clients are dissatisfied. At 78, Jake is also experiencing health concerns that preclude taking on any long-term contracts. He recognizes that in to-

Career Engagement



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Figure 1: Career Engagement

day's workplace it is now considered a bonus to have worked for multiple organizations; on the other hand, when he was building and sustaining his own professional career, staying with one employer was more highly respected.

Analysis. Through the lens of the career engagement model, Jake finds himself concurrently overwhelmed and underutilized, potentially moving towards disengagement in two different directions. Unpacking his concerns and strategically resolving them can help him shift back into the zone of optimal engagement, regardless of whether or not he chooses to return to work.

Jake's concerns about his lack of sector-specific knowledge, being respected by younger workers, and his declining physical health can all be conceptualized as capacity issues; in the career engagement model, capacity comprises both individual and organizational factors that include personal characteristics (e.g., health, age) and contextual variables (e.g., co-worker relationships, time, money). On the other hand, consulting work can be very challenging; Jake wants to do it well or not do it at all.

There are two approaches to resolving such a mismatch (i.e., high challenge and decreasing capacity) – reduce the challenge or increase capacity. A career professional working with Jake might ask whether Jake might find it more appealing to return to work as a consultant in a less stressful setting, unpacking with Jake what exactly is holding him back from pursuing his goal to continue working as a consultant. They might explore together which of the 20-30 organizations he'd served felt the least stressful and what sectors felt more like "home," offering a good fit.

On the other hand, it might

be helpful to support Jake in building capacity to meet the consulting challenges he anticipates. A career practitioner might enquire about Jake's health challenges and whether or not he is under a physician's care; it may be possible to stabilize or improve his health or recommend some workplace accommodations that will make returning to consulting work a more manageable option. Jake's concerns about lack of relevant knowledge suggest that some skill development or strategic partnerships might be helpful; Jake may be unaware of increased access to professional development through webinars, online learning, and even YouTube videos. Jake's concerns about interactions with younger workers and having his knowledge respected by them might benefit from some structured mixed-age group interactions, facilitating opportunities to collaborate across generations in a safe environment to help him regain confidence. It's likely that a combination of strategies, concurrently building capacity and reducing challenge, will equip Jake to re-enter his consulting career at a level that maximizes his engagement at work and in other life roles.

Case 2: Recently Retired High School Teacher (60-year-old female)

Background. Sandy (pseudonym) recently retired after 40 years of teaching in high schools, with the final 25 years in one school where, along with teaching home economics and hospitality, she also had some middle management (i.e., Department Head) responsibilities. Describing teaching as "the only career I have ever had," Sandy chose her retirement date but acknowledges that in the early days post-retirement she began thinking, "Oh my goodness, what have I done?" She realizes now that

she hadn't carefully thought through what retirement would look like for her; nor had she done much planning with her husband about how they would spend their time once retired. Instead, her motivation to retire had been less about her and more about creating space for others to move their careers forward. She reported with a laugh and a comment about it sounding silly now, "when it was time to retire I felt it was time to let the younger people have a go. I really felt I had a long career and that I didn't need to work and shouldn't be taking someone else's role. But then you give up work and think, 'but I really want to keep going!'"

Since retiring, Sandy has felt that she is missing out on opportunities to grow as a person, professionally and socially. She has witnessed others lose their edge and not have their heart in their work anymore; she really doesn't want to become like them and recognizes needs within herself to feel like she is doing something worthwhile, to be entrusted with responsibilities, and to get out and mix with people. She does thoroughly enjoy the flexibility that has come with retirement, appreciating her ability to engage in pleasurable non-work activities such as participating in a yoga class or going out with friends.

Recently, Sandy has taken on a part-time job as a consultant within a kitchen appliance business. Her colleagues are all younger women who are "really supportive and really nice." Sandy reported, "I don't feel as though I have vast experience and knowledge in what I'm doing . . . [but] I don't think they think 'oh, she's the old lady. Hope not.'"

Analysis. Using the career engagement model, Sandy's experience immediately post-retirement thrust her into the *underutilized* zone. With-

out a post-retirement plan, much of the structure and responsibility in Sandy's life had been removed; her capacity remained the same but her daily work-related challenges vanished overnight, leaving her with excess capacity for the challenges that she encountered.

Sandy's part-time job in the appliance store, however, quickly brought on new challenges – challenges that may have felt overwhelming without the added capacity of supportive co-workers. The right mix of challenging work, supportive co-workers, and a flexible schedule that provides space for additional pleasurable activities such as joining a yoga class have, together, returned Sandy to the zone of optimal engagement. As she becomes more knowledgeable about kitchen appliances, however, it's possible that her part-time work will feel less challenging. Although this may suit her by that point, if she is able to find more challenges in her other life roles, it may also result in her moving towards feeling underutilized again. At that point, Sandy may find it helpful to speak with her employer (and/or a career development professional) about new challenges that she can take on to stay optimally engaged.

Case 3: Semi-Retired Artist Who Started as a Flight Attendant (77-year-old female)

Background. Myrna (pseudonym) is frustrated in thinking that everyone now sees her as elderly. Fiercely independent, her career evolved throughout various chapters in her life and she doesn't like the feeling now that people see her as less capable than in previous life stages. She began her career as a flight attendant and loved working for the airline. However, back then, she had to give up her position when she be-

came married, in an era with no union protection and no maternity leave options. Myrna subsequently stayed home, caring for her children, spouse, and household responsibilities; it was only when her husband was nearing his retirement that she decided, with his full support, to attend university and complete a degree in Art and Painting. Creating and teaching art continue to bring her joy and are, combined, a big part of her identity; however, she recognizes that she is competing with others in the art world and that art is very personal.

In their semi-retirement, Myrna and her husband are living off a small pension and gradually whittling away at their nest egg – a big worry for them both. However, Myrna doesn't see herself as having relevant skills for today's workforce and, also, doesn't like the idea of people thinking that she needs to work for money. When asked about her beliefs about how others would see her as fitting into the workplace, she reflected, "They would obviously feel I was too old or too slow. I love children and would be interested in a kindergarten, but I'm sure they don't want elderly people."

Analysis. From a career engagement perspective, Myrna and her husband's current financial situation feels a bit overwhelming to them both (challenged by more expenses than their pension has the capacity to cover). However, thinking of getting paid work is also overwhelming; Myrna seems to have internalized beliefs about aging that make it difficult for her to imagine that others would value any contributions that she could make within a workplace. The career engagement model is useful to conceptualize the dynamic interaction between challenge and capacity – too little challenge and one begins to feel

underutilized; too much challenge, on the other hand, can be completely overwhelming. At the moment, Myrna appears to be paralysed in place; she recognizes their limited financial capacity but does not believe in her ability to earn the extra income that they need.

A career development professional might work with Myrna to concurrently reduce the challenge and build capacity, with the aim of helping Myrna to re-attach to the workforce in a meaningful and manageable way. Providing a supportive environment in which Myrna can demonstrate marketable competencies to herself and others might help to bolster Myrna's optimism; in the second author's earlier research (Neault, 2002), optimism was the most significant predictor of both career success and job satisfaction. In Canada, there are some community-based career development programs (e.g., In Motion and Momentum, Ontario Centre for Workforce Innovation, 2018) that are designed to prepare individuals for the workplace and to build motivation, optimism about the future, and self-esteem. Although generally designed for the unemployed and individuals who are more marginalized than Myrna, a similar program could provide the opportunity for her to interact with younger individuals, mentor them by sharing her valuable life experiences, and receive respect and appreciation in turn.

Other ways to build capacity for Myrna (and her husband) include exploring financial supports that they may be eligible for within their community (e.g., housing subsidies for seniors), reverse mortgages if they own their own home, or alternate sources of income through the sharing economy, such as hosting homestay students, listing available rooms in their home through Airbnb, or registering

as a driver with a ride share company. Myrna might also benefit from small business training that would equip her to earn more income from teaching and selling her art – work which already brings her joy in a sector in which she feels confident. Staying focused on a sector and occupation within which she feels comfortable would concurrently decrease the challenge associated with re-entering the workforce; any of these additional income sources would decrease the couple's financial challenges as well. The career engagement model is holistic, and considers the interactions between capacity and challenge across multiple life roles.

The Challenge and Implications for Practice and Policy

A major emerging theme during the initial research by Luke, McIlveen, and Perera (2016) was the exploration of career adaptability and how it was associated with those in retirement who re-engaged with career. Career adaptability was yet to be explored within vocational psychology research of re-engaged post-retirement age workers and Luke, McIlveen, and Perera (2016) were the first to qualitatively explore this cohort's career adaptability via individual interviews and thematic analysis to uncover themes.

To encourage the mature age and retiree population to remain in, or return to, the workforce, it is imperative that the needs of this demographic are considered carefully and thoughtfully before any policy recommendations or employment programs are produced and implemented. Throughout the research of Luke, McIlveen, and Perera (2016), retirement-age participants illustrated via their interview responses that they had an overall desire to know that

their work and life experiences were of value and worth to the workplace. If governments and employers recognize and learn from the valuable experience and knowledge provided by retirees who reengage with work, this will only serve to fuel the career adaptabilities of this age cohort and provide opportunities for them to fully engage in meaningful work.

In research focusing on the transition of work to retirement from a life design perspective, Froidevaux (2018) concluded that it is important for researchers and career practitioners to explore how late-career workers and retirees can design their lives in a socially productive and rewarding way. The recommendations presented in this article agree with this sentiment and provide scope for career development interventions that would encourage older workers to be active players in creating and sustaining their ongoing career engagement and provide them opportunity to discover meaningful work as they adapt and advance in today's rapidly changing workforce landscape.

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