

What does 'Career' mean to older women?

The voices of 60 year olds...



This is a summary of some findings from a qualitative study of women and men born in 1948/1949, in their 60th year.

Christopoulos, M. and Bromage, V. (2009) *What does 'career' mean to people in their 60th year? Reflections, projections and interpretations by people born in the late 1940s* Derby: International Centre for Guidance Studies and TAEN.

Having a 'career' was much harder for women born in the late 1940s than men

'It's unbelievably hard for women to sustain a career in our labour market and it remains unbelievably difficult because the penalties associated with people taking time out and the punitive costs of childcare and the extreme rarity of high quality child care.' (female).

Gender themes were the most important single set of career issues in this study. Both men and women registered significant concern about gender issues. Not only did some women define their own career as distinct from a male career most also tended to follow different career paths. The career paths, illustrate the challenges of taking career breaks to have children, although not all the women interviewed had had children.

There were differing aspirations, differing expectations of family for sons and daughters and there were fewer occupational options available for females during the decades 1965 to 2005. This was a time of change for women; some women a little older were not able to work in some occupational areas once married. The women in this group entered adulthood and the workforce when the legislative dice were loaded against them and it was not until these people were 25 that UK law gave them equal access to the job market. Many had experienced low expectations and aspirations for their careers in their early years, possibly resulting in a lack of confidence in career progression and career management later in life. It is likely that the careers of many of the women born in the late 1940s continued to be influenced by these factors throughout their working lives.

Career paths

60 year old women were less likely than men to have one career for life

'Well I had 32 years in local government so that was a career for life kind of job which maybe people say now is – you know – not as likely to happen is it?'

Two-thirds of the group could be described as 'career for lifers' staying in one occupational career for the vast majority of their employed life. They included most of the men interviewed but half of the women.

The job movers

'they didn't do apprentices (in a bakery). So I went along obviously, got certificates at the end basically from all the jobs I went into, and then from there I wanted to do something different so I said I'm going to try the forces.' (female).

A third of interviewees could best be described as occupationally mobile undertaking a vast range of occupations. Two of the women say that they have never stopped working (in paid work) since leaving school, – one at the age of 15, the other at 14 – even continuing working at weekends while they were bringing up young children. Others mention redundancy and feelings that the career they were in was not appropriate – or becoming stressful. The importance of bringing up a family was also mentioned, also the broader caring role.

How important is 'direction'/sense of direction to older women?

'What – my working life? I suppose it's quite often been lacking in direction. I wish, looking back, that I'd had a feeling of what I'd wanted to do. I'd never sort of known what I wanted to do. If you like I'm still sort of trying to decide what to do when I grow up.' (female).

This evidence would suggest that the **career trajectories of men and women from the late 1940s were often divergent, with men experiencing their chosen careers, focusing on work within one occupational area while many of their female counterparts tending to experience a patchwork of occupations and not achieving career-long expertise in any of them.**

Women and men tended to have different understandings of the word 'career'

The meaning of 'career' – or 'just a working life'

Different concepts of career between genders

'something that's passed me by completely, something that men tend to do and women if they yearn for it.' (female).

Some of the women interviewed gave a similar explanation of 'career' to most of the men, however almost half defined their understanding of career in a different way from the men, typically by stating that they had had 'jobs' and a 'working life', although some refined their responses by saying that they had experience of a 'career' at some stage. In three of these cases the 'career' had been when they were younger

and the 'jobs' had been fillers in later life. The change from career to job had not coincided with childcare responsibilities in all three cases.

'I don't think that I have had a career. It has been a series of jobs that fit around husband and kids. I never planned a career.' (female).

'I don't think of myself having a career just a working life.' (female).

'Something I should have had, yes I mean if you like I had a teaching career. I don't regard my current job as being a career. I see it as a job. A career should be something that you progress in and changes as time goes on.' (female).

'But the word doesn't really mean anything. I think the word 'job' is more – you know, and I've got 'work' and I've got a 'job.' (female).

'A career should be something that you progress in and changes as time goes on.' (female).

'this time of life career means the end of our career.' (female).

Some older women felt that any kind of career would have to be fitted around domestic life and childcare, therefore their expectations of a career were low and 'just a working life' (female). This also tied in with the thoughts that the word 'job' fitted better than 'career', for them, therefore following different career routes than men. In spite of these particular concepts of career from some women, there was reference to the broader concept of careers, with the general viewpoint that there would be progression and development; people should seek advice from people who knew about careers, along with a hint of regret for a career they would have liked to have had. The concept of career for the male interviewees in some instances echoed the thoughts of their female counterparts, in relation to development and gaining skills, but with the additional emphasis relating to 'continuous employment' (male). A different slant on this was that a career was something 'chosen ...probably expected to do and continue to do that all the way through' (male).

An interesting dichotomy emerged, many felt that the type of career they had experienced, or understood was different from that of younger people, 'Looking at a career as being something quite possible for people of my age, but possibly not for younger people any more' (male). It was also felt that although a career was something a person set out to achieve that maybe 'something that is lost these days people flit around much more' (male), and that although for them a career was for life, 'now I think people can have several careers, careers can mean lots of different things. A career used to mean a job for life now I don't think a career means a job for life.' (female). Several interviewees referred to the demise of the 'job for life'.

There was a collective use of similar phrases used to describe the concept of career. Some of the female interviewees' expectations were low, regretting the inability to follow the same career path as their male counterparts. There was a division around a career being applicable only if they were in paid employment, that a career stopped once someone stopped working; however it was felt that voluntary work was an extension of a career, post retirement. It was felt that there was no longer a job for life and that having experience of a life with plenty of career choices was no longer possible.

'We've been very lucky' – the fortunate age group, born in the late 1940s in the UK

'We have been a lucky generation in that right from the start there were plenty of jobs, some of us had the benefit of grammar school education and beyond which opened up opportunities not given to preceding generations (or in my case older siblings).' (female).

Were there special features of the careers of people born in 1948/1949?

This group has experienced a possibly unique time of lengthy peace and relative UK prosperity. They were – in their own views – the last of the job for life generation. They regarded themselves as fortunate. Not only were jobs available to them relatively easily throughout their working lives but the job market was easily accessible to most – they could access by just knocking on doors, rather than making complex job application procedures.

Current 60 year olds in the UK were the people who designed and developed the information technology revolutionary careers. Debatable these were people who established significant elements of careers in the newly established health services. New opportunities were available to this age cohort: new technology, new education chances; there was spectacular change in the workplace. Although women of this age were handicapped by discriminatory employment practices at the start of their careers, many of them have led interesting and fulfilling careers and working lives, as distinct from their mothers. Many people born at this time have escaped the current recessionary ravages, although some aged 60 are the first victims of the new economic times in 2008 and 2009.

Would your career have been different if you had been your 'mythical twin' of the opposite gender?

Women and men felt strongly that their careers would have been different if they had been 'their virtual twin of the opposite gender'. One woman summarised succinctly her own opinion of the pathways open to men like her, 'Fewer jobs, more progression within original career'.

Ten themes were recognised by the interviewees:

Influences of parents, family and societal backgrounds

One interviewee suggested there were different parental expectations for the career of their sons and daughters. Some parents expected their sons to be the prime breadwinners, thus requiring careers support and guidance, but not their daughters.

'I think it was very different for them (boys) in terms of gender, because I think they were expected to get jobs and I think... like my parents' advice to me was zilch really. But to my brother who is two years younger than me I feel they gave him far more advice,... but they were much clearer ahead about their expectations that he was expected to do, how he was expected to go on – actually you know in that sense I don't think it was necessarily the right advice because I don't think it was actually what he necessarily wanted to do but I think they had more consideration about him.' (female).

Lack of parental encouragement for non gender traditional roles

'If I'd been a man I tell you one job I've always wanted to do, I've always wanted to be a train driver. I'd probably done that because my granddad was into the railway. When you look back I remember when I was about 10 or 12 and I said to my Dad, I want to be a train driver, cos I was always interested in trains. Where I used to live there was always the trains.'

Fate and destiny

Several of the women interviewed considered it had been a women's lot to stay at home and not follow a career.

'Men were supposed to go out to work, it was their destiny. My dad, my grandfather, you know they had to go out to work, my grandmother she used to stay at home, she had seven children washing, ironing and to look after the family. She had to cook, ...everything, she used to make everything.'

Different education and training opportunities available to boys and girls in the 1960s

Some spoke of a strict gender divide at school, and also a divide between those who gained a grammar school place, and those who did not.

'As we went to a girls' school. I don't really know what went on in the secondary modern schools, as encouraging people to go into apprenticeships.'

'Thinking back to where I went to school, the school I went into, the boys were on the second floor, the girls were on the first floor – separate playgrounds and never the twain shall meet. Now I went to a boys grammar school I can't think if there was a girls grammar school to go to where we came from – I've never even thought of that – the other possibilities (another local school) which certainly was a boys school I don't actually know there was a grammar school so maybe if I'd been a girl I probably would have gone to one of the secondary mod /comprehensives that were coming in. It's hard, I probably wouldn't have done well, I think.'

'I'm thinking of my brother now because my brother is only 18 months younger than me and he did an apprenticeship which is very, very similar to me doing shorthand and typing. He worked for the organisation1 and he is still with the organisation1 and he's been there for – since he was 15 and he's now what 57. He's been with them all that time. So no again, I don't think being a man would have changed – would have made a difference. Get an apprenticeship, that's the thing to do... that's what it was in those days, the boys were apprentices and the girls did the shorthand and typing.'

Opportunity structure in the area: local versus national opportunities

Those who had left school at 15 or 16 were restricted to the jobs available locally, the Armed forces, or in the case of one interviewee, travel to the UK.

'I'm just trying to recall the girls who I went to school with and I think the vast majority of them did actually settle for jobs around the locality. We didn't look very far afield in Matlock.' (male)

Choices of careers available, barriers to entry

'My brother went to one (a secondary modern school) and he was encouraged to do apprenticeships – because he went to (company) to do his engineering apprenticeship there, so that university wasn't really mentioned – there probably was the option but not generally.'

'Certainly when I was training in medicine there was a huge view to having mainly male undergraduates – the ratio – I mean when I went – I went to one of the

training hospitals with the lowest ratios, somewhere about 8%. I don't think there were many with more than 20%. I'm sure there was an attitude within the appointing committees at the time that you were wasting time in employing girls up to a point, I mean there was the all female Royal Free Hospital but I think medicine was still viewed very much as predominantly a male occupation but you needed a few girls for the gynae jobs – in the delicate areas. Probably certainly (my career would have been different if I had been female) from where I was living.'

The legal framework also presented tangible barriers to career progression

All the interviewees entered the UK labour market without the legal protection of equal opportunities legislation. Employers and universities could and did discriminate against females – until the mid 1970s – in many key areas: recruitment, training, promotion and parenthood.

Men's jobs – women's jobs

Four career areas were seen by individual interviewees as particularly 'female', nursing, health visiting, physiotherapy and infant school teaching. Other areas: information technology civil engineering and medicine were considered to be 'male'.

'I am just trying to work out what I think during my lifetime there have been, has been a sort of this is women's work and this is men's work sort of thing.' (male).

Career breaks

Several interviewees talked about the career 'breaks' taken by women to have children.

'So I think it would have been a catastrophic effect had I been female at that point.' (male).

'He wouldn't have had the problem of childcare I think that's the biggest drawback to women working and because my childbearing years have spanned 40 years that's precluded most things, whereas a man can take a few weeks as far as having a baby, he can go back to work.'

'very predominantly, it's the man who has the career and is the breadwinner and is the dominant role person, has the dominant role.'

'Well when women married, when they had a child, they left and the expectation was that when they went back they had to start again.'

Opportunities for career progression

Poor opportunities for women to progress in many career areas were identified, including social work, teaching in schools and higher education, local government and information technology.

'And I mean I just go through my contemporaries and they were – you know they just moved up the ladder so much quicker and moved so much higher.' (female)

'In the local government sector pay was equal anyway, but that's only half the story isn't it? It's also about opportunities to work flexibly, and take maternity leave and all those things that have come in more recently and still there's a difference'

The value of careers advice

Views on the careers advice and the school careers support that was experienced by the interviewees were mixed. Less than half subjects overtly mentioned careers advice and guidance during their reflections on their career.

The recognition that careers information, advice and guidance is important

Not having had access to any careers advice, the importance of obtaining careers advice was recommended by one interviewee as she felt that it was 'something you know to look for and advice people who knows about career to give you advice and I wish I had that'. (female).

Perceptions of a careers advice 'vacuum'

Some interviewees mentioned a lack or inadequacy of careers advice.

'I remember being told that you need to plan your career, that I honestly think that I didn't get very good career advice – I think that I got zilch career advice at school – although theoretically we had it.' She felt that the level of careers advice when she left college was the same and was amazed that certain people went into things like industry 'because I honestly don't think that was on offer in my mind. So I don't feel I was given any proper opportunities or guidance. She later added that 'listening to people they didn't have any better career advice than me at school or college and I think that's true whether they're men or women and I think probably they've had the same.' She felt that the reason for not having good advice was due to the fact that 'the generation who were actually teaching me weren't clear that we'd necessarily work and that they felt that they had a sort of restricted view of what women did.'

Careers advice got better later

A small number of people felt that careers advice was better for those younger than them. On reflection one interviewee thought that the careers advice was better nowadays, and that if the standard had been higher when she was making her career decisions 'my eyes might have been a bit wider open', and regrets the careers advice they were given.