

## 5. The impact of life and career stages on workers' career sustainability

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### CONCEPTUALIZING SUSTAINABLE CAREERS

A career is defined as the sequence of work experiences that evolves over an individual's life course (Arthur et al., 1989). There are two central elements in this definition: "work" and "time." More recently, Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015, p. 7) have introduced the concept of *sustainable careers*, defined as "the sequence of an individual's different career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual."

In this chapter, we explore the possible impact of life and career stages on workers' career sustainability and work-life balance by taking a whole-life perspective (Hirschi et al., 2020; Van der Heijden et al., 2020). This means considering the intersection of work and non-work roles and interaction with surrounding stakeholders, thereby incorporating the person into their working and private life. Borrowing from the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018) and self-determination theory (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000), we argue that in order to have a sustainable career, people need to interact with surrounding stakeholders to fulfill their psychological needs (i.e. autonomy, competence, and relatedness), in order to bring about resource gains that form a pattern in which job and home resources are associated with other resources (i.e. resource caravans; Westman et al., 2004).

In addition, from selection optimization and compensation theory (Baltes et al., 1999) and socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1995, 2006), we know that individuals' goals change over their life span. First, selection optimization and compensation theory (Baltes et al., 1999) states that people are inclined to maximize the gains and minimize the losses they experience over time by using various strategies. Analogously, socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1995, 2006) proposes that changes in the perception of

time that are related to age result in changes in social goals or motives, thereby shifting the motive for social interaction from gaining resources (i.e. instrumental, such as a promotion at work) towards affective rewards (i.e. emotional, such as receiving a volunteer award) and strengthening one's identity. Our whole-life perspective enables us to better understand individual perceptions about sustainable (and unsustainable) life and career phases and their causes, in both one's working life and private life. We differentiate between three age groups when discussing the impact of individual and organizational determinants on one's happiness, health, and productivity, the core indicators of career sustainability (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden, 2005). We see these three indicators both as key to the worker's prosperity and as the building blocks for the welfare of relatives and peers, the employer, and society.

Based on the job demands-resources model (Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti et al., 2001) (an occupational stress model which suggests that strain is a response to an imbalance between demands put on the individual and the resources that they have to cope with these demands), Demerouti et al. (2012) differentiate between job demands and resources on the one hand and home demands and resources on the other, and posit that these are to some extent determined by the life and career stages that people go through. We build on this theoretical framework to disentangle the challenges and opportunities in both one's working life and private life that may impact career sustainability and work-life balance. We will explain our line of reasoning more clearly by discussing some key examples of the challenges and opportunities often encountered by starters (20–34 years), middle-aged workers (35–49 years), and seniors ( $\geq 50$  years old) (Van der Heijden, 2000).

At the same time, we want to stress that we view sustainable careers and work-life balance through a non-normative lens (Van der Heijden, 2005). This perspective means that perceptions about positive and negative experiences in one's working and private life are idiosyncratic to the person, and dynamic across their particular life and career stages (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). In other words, people may take very different views on what constitutes a sustainable career and an ideal work-life balance, and it is the individual's perceptions about the interplay between one's working life and private life that determine their happiness, health, and productivity (i.e. their career sustainability) and their work-life balance. These views can also change over time. In addition, people may react very differently to career shocks (i.e. disruptive and extraordinary events that are, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the individual's control and that trigger a deliberate thought process concerning one's career; Akkermans et al., 2018), depending on their personality, career competencies, resilience, and agentic orientation, to mention but a few (De Vos et al., 2020).

In the next section, we will further illustrate our whole-life perspective on sustainable careers and work–life balance using real-life examples. Depending on a person's life and career stage, different actors and events can affect career sustainability and work–life balance, and generally life and career stages are defined by age. As such, aging, in both one's working life and private life, entails a multi-dimensional process that comprises changes in a person's psychological, physical, social, as well as societal functioning over time (Sterns & Doverspike, 1989). The exemplary conceptualization of age, including subjective measures, developed by Sterns and Doverspike (1989) helps us to better understand age-related changes over time as a result of factors such as health, career stage, and family status, and to identify the potential implications for career sustainability. Our non-normative approach to sustainable careers and work–life balance (Van der Heijden, 2005) helps to disentangle specific challenges and hindrances, and in some cases even the career shocks that starters, middle-aged, and seniors may have to deal with. It can also be used as a starting point for in-depth discussions between all the stakeholders involved.

## DEMANDS AND RESOURCES AMONG STARTERS

Generally speaking, starters are subject to high job demands and high home demands, and often lack resources in both domains (Demerouti et al., 2012). They need to find a job and invest time in the socialization process in the organization they are employed by. They also need to invest considerable energy in developing their knowledge and skills. Indeed, Akkermans et al. (2013) provided empirical support for the importance of career competencies for starters with regard to their perception of their own employability.

Once employed, starters in the labor market see their earnings increase, have access to intra- and extra-organizational networks, and may benefit from social support as they become better acquainted with other members of their working team, both their direct supervisor and close colleagues, thereby enhancing their productivity. As regards one's private life, a stable and meaningful relationship with a partner is a home resource that can help starters to cope with career shocks, such as a situation in which an employment contract is not extended, thereby protecting their happiness and health. Simultaneously, if the employee has children, home demands will increase and remain high until the youngest child reaches school age. This may have an impact on productivity.

However, it is important to note that workers usually enjoy having children, which can add resources that contribute to one's happiness and health. Conversely, workers without children may experience impediments in career sustainability and work–life balance, such as greater difficulty managing the work–non-work boundary, because it is more likely that work responsibilities may intrude into their private time. At the same time, many in this group

benefit from the fact that they have more freedom in choosing how to spend their time and they have fewer family responsibilities.

## DEMANDS AND RESOURCES AMONG MIDDLE-AGED WORKERS

In the mid-life phase, workers are generally exposed to higher job demands and average home demands, and also have high resources in both the work and non-work domains (Demerouti et al., 2012). To reach the level of expert at work, people need to invest considerable time and effort in building up their competencies. At the same time, many of them have more flexibility and autonomy to shape their careers than starters. One might be inclined to conclude that the position of middle-aged workers is more favorable than that of starters or seniors in the labor market.

However, it is also important to note that in the event of a serious life event (i.e. career shock), such as needing to care for elderly or sick parents or bereavement, career sustainability and work–life balance may be jeopardized. Even in cases where individuals in the mid-career stage no longer have children of preschool or primary school age, they might still need careful consideration by their employer in order to combine work and non-work roles and achieve the required productivity at work while also maintaining their happiness and health.

At the same time, from the theories of selection optimization and compensation (Baltes et al., 1999) and socio-emotional selectivity (Carstensen, 1995, 2006), we know that people's goals change over their life span. To illustrate, for many middle-aged workers, non-work roles become more valuable over time, such as volunteer work, community activism, and church and family-focused activities. Changes in what is perceived as meaningful in mid-life, in this case built around an increased focus on generativity, imply that motivational factors need to be taken into account when understanding what makes people happy, healthy, and productive across their life span.

## DEMANDS AND RESOURCES AMONG SENIORS

In late adulthood, people generally have average job and home demands and high job and home resources (Demerouti et al., 2012). According to the life-span theories of selection optimization and compensation (Baltes et al., 1999) and socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1995, 2006), because of selectivity in choosing their career steps or because of their greater ability to choose because of their seniority, older workers are more likely to have shaped careers with a better balance between demands and resources, which will probably help them safeguard their productivity. At the same time,

they are also likely to be more emotionally mature, to have more wisdom, and to have developed more effective coping strategies in relation to both work and private life, which are likely to improve their happiness and health.

Moreover, people's goals tend to change across their life span due to a changing future time perspective (Lang & Carstensen, 2002), and this may make senior workers more concerned with preserving certain resources (e.g. protecting their current job) as they become less inclined to invest in new resources (e.g. creating new career opportunities). Similarly, seniors may want to spend more time with children or grandchildren, travelling or pursuing other leisure activities, and they may prioritize family and private life activities over work. In particular, senior workers tend to attach greater value to high-quality social-emotional interactions than to developing a large social network, and therefore will typically invest more in high-quality relationships.

Notwithstanding the wide variety among individuals, which increases with age because everybody takes a unique path through life, seniors often lack career development support from their supervisor due to age-related stereotyping (Van der Heijden, 2005). However, understanding what motivates these workers is vital in order to sustain their happiness, health, and productivity. In general, older workers want to do meaningful work but are also striving for a better balance between demands and resources, and expect a reduction in both job and family role responsibilities (Demerouti et al., 2001). If the latter is not forthcoming, or if a serious life event (such as losing a partner) or other career shock (such as a major restructuring that threatens their employment) occurs, they may experience a decrease in career sustainability, reflected in lower happiness, health, and productivity. A (temporary) decrease in career sustainability is quite conceivable for many seniors, as more of them have one or more elderly parent(s) who need care. Due to an increased life expectancy and later retirement ages, this situation is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Figure 5.1 summarizes the main resources and demands among starters, middle-aged, and seniors.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICES

The age at which people start raising a family varies considerably these days, if indeed they opt to do so at all. The same applies to the age when they focus on their career the most, when they experience serious challenges and impediments, or face career shocks. Managers and workers alike therefore need to approach age as multi-dimensional, with highly idiosyncratic events and outcomes for work and private life. This means taking account of mental and physical health, private life, occupational competencies, and attitudes regarding opportunities in workers' remaining time at work. The latter could lead to the provision of tailor-made job resources, such as well-thought-out

Overall: High job and home demands Low job and home resources	Overall: High job and average home demands High job and home resources	Overall: Average job and home demands High job and home resources
<b>Resources + Opportunities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gaining initial income</li> <li>- Gaining access to social networks</li> <li>- Developing career competencies</li> <li>- Having a stable home situation</li> </ul>	<b>Resources + Opportunities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Experiencing autonomy</li> <li>- Experiencing flexibility</li> <li>- Realizing career progress</li> <li>- Exploring meaningful activities</li> </ul>	<b>Resources + Opportunities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gaining increased authority</li> <li>- Mastering coping strategies</li> <li>- Having the flexibility to self-manage</li> <li>- Realizing work-home enrichment</li> </ul>
<b>Demands + Challenges</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Investing energy in finding a job</li> <li>- Establishing a vocational identity</li> <li>- Socializing into initial employment</li> <li>- Experiencing work-home conflicts</li> </ul>	<b>Demands + Challenges</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Being at a career crossroads</li> <li>- Feeling pressure to advance</li> <li>- Solidifying work-home balance</li> <li>- Facing personal tasks like eldercare</li> </ul>	<b>Demands + Challenges</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Experiencing age stereotyping</li> <li>- Focusing on resource preservation</li> <li>- Seeking meaning toward retirement</li> <li>- (Re)Prioritizing life and career issues</li> </ul>
<b>STARTERS</b> (≤ 34 years)	<b>MIDDLE-AGED</b> (35-49 years)	<b>SENIORS</b> (≥ 50 years)

Figure 5.1 Overview of main resources and demands across career stages

age-conscious human resource management practices (Veth et al., 2019) in the workplace, or to focused help by means of support systems in one's private life, being an important home resource.

The value of a given job or home resource – and even the saliency of the resource gain versus resource loss principles of conservation of resources theory – are likely to vary significantly over time and across different contexts (De Vos et al., 2020). In addition, over time, changes are likely to take place not only within the individual (see the age-related changes as portrayed in Sterns & Doverspike, 1989), but also within the broader context of the individual's career. Only when a systemic approach (Colakoglu et al., 2006) to sustainable careers is taken can we determine the influential factors that are associated with multiple stakeholders situated in the context of both work and private life and their evolution over time. By adopting a whole-life perspective, we argue that the different aspects of the ecosystem that surrounds an individual's career can be aligned and carefully balanced.

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