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A person-in-context perspective on care(e)r success: examining (changing) conceptualisations of career success of mid-life women providing informal care for dependent adults

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the perspectives of career success of mid-life (ages 45–65) women engaging in paid employment alongside informal caring for dependent adults in the United Kingdom (UK). Calendar interviews were conducted with 30 mid-life women in Leicestershire where the focus was on understanding the participants' own perspectives on career success. Findings demonstrate that following the turning point or career shock of becoming a carer, mid-life women often report changing perceptions of career success towards subjective measures. This extends existing literature on the shaping of career transitions to specifically include the effects of decisions around care responsibilities on perspectives on career success. We demonstrate the utility of the notion of the sustainable career and bring a different perspective to the literature on career success, an important contribution especially as the need to balance informal caring and formal employment has become more prevalent. Finally, we highlight a specific role for Human Resource Development practitioners in managing policy and career conversations with employees beyond objective measures enabling individuals to pursue career success in ways that can integrate work and non-work roles.

Introduction

This article explores perspectives on career success of mid-life women who combine informal care for dependent adults with paid employment. Consistent with many countries, the UK is suffering from a social care crisis: namely an ageing population, with increased health problems and associated disabilities, whilst the government has continued to invest less in adult social care (Grierson, 2017; Petrie & Kirkup, 2018). This has led to an increasing reliance on informal carers; indeed, the care they provide has been valued at £162 billion per year – a contribution equal to a second National Health Service (Petrillo & Bennett, 2023).

An informal carer is usually understood to be a family member who supplies unpaid care to someone in their family or a friend who is dependent on them (Milne & Larkin, 2015). The greater reliance on informal carers has a gendered and aged effect as, at the time of the last census in England in 2021, women were statistically more likely to care than men in every age group up to 79 years. Specifically, women between 55 and 59 provided the most care (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2021). This is a population which also has a high rate of employment of approximately 67% (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2023). However, informal caring clearly has an impact as Carers UK (2019) report that more than 600 people give up work every day due to their caring responsibilities and employment rates of older workers remain lower than desired (EC, 2021). Employment of older workers continues to be on the public policy agenda as a method to respond to ageing populations and of particular interest are mid-life women as they transition into becoming older workers (EC, 2021).

Caring for adults is considered as a different responsibility or burden to caring for children (Livingston, 2018). Indeed, it is difficult to predict how much time caring will take up as care needs often grow rather than decrease, particularly in light of age-related conditions. This can lead to caring drawing upon management of emotions and finances as well as physical activities (Livingston, 2018).

This article concentrates specifically on the UK context; however, the issue of combining paid work and informal care is a global one. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2019) suggests that worldwide unpaid carers cover between 70% and 95% of all care requirements. The burden of this disproportionately falls upon women, where no country in the world has an equal share of care between genders (International Labour Organisation, 2018). Even health and social care needs in many middle- and high-income countries are unsustainable without carers (International Labour Organisation, 2018; Pickard, 2008). It is likely therefore that the findings from this research could have wider significance beyond the UK.

Alongside changing demographics, developments in organisation structures and operating environments have led to the development of contemporary models of careers that are more fluid and flexible (protean, boundaryless, customised, life design, kaleidoscope, etc. See summary in Mainiero & Gibson, 2018). In turn, this has led to calls for scholars to re-examine what is meant by career success (Guan et al., 2019; McDonald & Hite, 2008; Seibert et al., 2024). With relevance to the group under study in this article, there is now a considerable body of literature which focuses on the gender differences between experiences of, perspectives on, and transitions within, careers (Mainiero & Gibson, 2018). Scholars have written on the intersections of women's paid employment and home life with Greenhaus and Kossek (2014) arguing specifically that one way of increasing understanding of contemporary careers is to explore how these intersections influence conceptualisations of career success. The career transitions of mid-life individuals have been the focus of a number of studies (e.g. August, 2011; Bullock-Yowell et al., 2012; Cabrera, 2007; Herr, 2013; Mainiero & Gibson, 2018); however, conceptualisations of career success of this group have not received much attention. For example, Mainiero and Gibson (2018) proposed the Kaleidoscope Career Model, exploring how mid-career men and women differ in their priorities of seeking authenticity, balance, and challenge in their careers. Additionally, they (2018: 364) note that the sharpest shaping of career

transitions is likely to occur at the mid-life stage when individuals are forced to confront work-family life priorities. However, the effects of decisions around care responsibilities on perspectives of career success have not hitherto been explored for this group.

There are obvious implications for Human Resource Development (HRD) practice, and indeed, McDonald and Hite (2008) argue that we need to understand how individuals define career success to create effective career development systems (see also Shuck et al., 2018). Our argument is that if we understand how these women, who are relied on so much for informal care, conceptualise career success, it may be easier to provide support for their combination of care with paid work. This may lead to higher employment rates and/or lower rates of exit from the labour market. In career development terms, it may also be that the caring activities themselves could contribute to perspectives on career success and should be considered by HRD professionals and organisational policies. This article examines an under-researched group, namely mid-life women, and how they conceptualise career success in the context of their informal caring responsibilities for adults. Specifically, it asks: 1) how do mid-life women perceive career success following the turning point of becoming a carer and in the context of informal caring? and 2) in what ways are these perceptions different to their views prior to the turning point?

We argue that understanding the ways in which perceptions of career success are informed by and are affected by their caring responsibilities makes a contribution to scholarship on career success. Furthermore, we posit that a 'person-in-context' perspective is crucial here to move beyond simple notions of objective and subjective career success. Such a perspective aims to understand individuals and their experiences such as Savickas (2005) emphasising narratives and life context; Patton (1997, 2006, 2011) Systems Theory Framework placing the individual at the centre of both individual, social system and wider contextual issues; and the work of De Vos et al. (2020) in sustainable careers. This meets recommendations for future research made by Siebert et al. (2024, p. 526) for the wider use of the sustainable career perspective but in a way which explicitly acknowledges the interplay between individual and contextual antecedents and possible moderators of career success. We are able to directly address this by focusing on the specific turning points in the life course of this group of women. Thus, we are able to bring a different perspective to the literature on career success, an especially important contribution as the need to balance informal caring and formal employment has become more prevalent.

In addition, our findings have implications for the role of HRD practice, which includes the recommendation of a personalised approach, taking account of women's adult caring context. HRD practitioners need to coach and train line managers in having key career conversations, beyond objective setting, and developing organisational cultures to support flexibility in work, life, and career success conceptualisations.

Literature review

Changing conceptualisations of careers

Understandings of career success have their foundations in two developments within careers scholarship. First, the emergence of contemporary models of careers

which relate to the more fluid and flexible career landscape such as protean, boundaryless, customised, life design, and kaleidoscope (see review in Mainiero & Gibson, 2018, pp. 361–362). Notions of stable employment and organisational careers have faded with the changing dynamics of the labour market which has seen development from traditional, hierarchical, and linear patterns of careers within organisations to the integration of personal and professional lives focused more on an individual's skills and knowledge and the subjective nature of careers (Cohen & El-Sawad, 2006).

Second, conceptualisations of careers have been criticised for failing to adequately account for gendered experiences by focusing on white, middle class, and male-dominated sectors (McCash, 2008) where, typically, scholars remain focused on notions of linear progress (Gee, 2017). Account needs to be taken of the increasing presence of women in the labour force and the idea that the development of women's careers may be different from men's (Cohen & El-Sawad, 2006; Kirton, 2006; O'Neil et al., 2005; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Moving beyond protean, boundaryless and portfolio models, feminist theorists have developed models of careers specifically related to women's experiences, namely: the life-career model (Pringle & Dixon, 2003); phases of a woman's career (O'Neil et al., 2005); and Kaleidoscope Careers (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005, 2006). The Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) has perhaps been most applied and tested amongst these (Mainiero & Gibson, 2018), recognising that women's careers are relational in that they make decisions taking account of the people and all aspects of their lives.

Moving to sustainable careers

A more recent notion that has emerged within the HRD literature and is relevant in the context of our empirical study is that of the sustainable career (see useful review in Seibert et al., 2024). This is where work aligns with the strengths and interests of individuals, includes continuous learning and opportunities for renewal, provides employability for current and future security, and adapts so that life and work mesh well over the lifespan (Valcour, 2017, p. 22). De Vos et al. (2020, p. 184). It is significant, therefore, to understand individual *persons'* interpretations of their careers and how they react to events. Furthermore, this can be within both a work and personal *context*. In this study, the context referred to is that of being a mid-life woman, working and providing informal care in the UK, in the wake of a social care crisis. Thirdly, this should be examined recognising evolving *time*. Indeed, the importance of adopting a temporal perspective on career success within the sustainable career perspectives is seen to be a particular strength, addressing the failure of purely cross-sectional studies to capture dynamic fluctuations in the importance of specific career concerns and how they impact career success (Seibert et al., 2024, p. 526).

Sustainable careers are found to be particularly relevant to the more flexible types of work in the 21st century, particularly post-pandemic (McDonald et al., 2022), but also in recognition of those that juggle formal employment and caring responsibilities. De Vos et al. (2020) advise that these dimensions of sustainable careers can be examined in response to career shocks. Akkermans et al. (2018, p. 4) use the term 'career shocks' to describe chance events which shape careers and are typically outside of an individual's control. Depending on how we seek to define careers and their development, they point

to shocks which 'likely represent a major antecedent of career development episodes, and how one reacts to these events may be an important determinant of the level of one's career success' (Akkermans et al., 2018. 4; see also Seibert et al., 2024, pp. 525–6).

Greenhaus and Kossek (2014) contend that careers have long been studied in isolation from other areas of employees' lives, such as their caring responsibilities. Recognising role pressures, they suggest that participation in one role, such as caring, can influence the effectiveness in another role such as paid work. As identified, there can be many external factors that influence the development of careers. The concept of a turning point has been found to be particularly salient here. A turning point is defined as 'a time or event when one took a different direction from that in which one had been travelling' (Clausen, 1998), p. 202). Often turning points are identified when individuals reflect on their life course and will be different across cultures, social contexts, and historical conditions (Hareven & Masaoka, 1988). Indeed, Gee (2017) refers to careers being influenced by fateful moments and episodes. In relation to this study and caring for dependent adults, the turning point was when the women identified with the term carer as defined in our introduction. This could happen over a period of time or could be in relation to a sudden event such as illness. It could also be informed by the amount of hours caring, relationship with the care recipient, and impact on other areas of their life such as work.

Returning to the notion of sustainable careers, therefore, the context within which the career shock happens interacts with careers at a particular time and informs how people respond. De Vos et al. (2020) include examples of injury and health occurrences. We therefore sought to re-visit data collected in 2016 to examine *person* in *context* changing notions of career success over *time* following the career shock, or the turning point of becoming a carer, in the wake of growing literature and conceptualisations of sustainable careers.

Focusing on career success

As detailed, career success is one indicator of sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020). It can be considered as an achievement of work experiences at a given time (Arthur et al., 2005), commonly conceptualised as involving either or both objective and subjective dimensions (see review in Seibert et al., 2024: section 3). Objectively, career success has traditionally comprised tangible, observable, and quantifiable criteria verifiable by a third party, such as pay and promotion (Hughes, 1937, 1958 cited by Dries, 2011, p. 114; Nicholson, 2000 cited by Dries, 2011: 373). Subjective career success is linked to satisfaction with one's career (Heslin, 2005). Mirvis and Hall (1996, p. 366) define it as 'the experience of achieving goals that are personally meaningful to the individual, rather than those set by parents, peers, an organisation, or society'. Therefore, all workers might be deemed as having career success; an individual who believes they have a successful career may not necessarily consider a different role with less job satisfaction as any less successful or an individual may be dissatisfied with their current role but not with the progression opportunities it offers or vice versa (Heslin, 2005).

Objective and subjective success can be linked and inform each other and Arthur et al. (2005): 180) argue that 'only through conceiving both sides could the researcher grasp the social processes that lie behind careers, and behind career success', thereby recognising

that individuals are continually interpreting their career experiences (see similar arguments in Seibert et al., 2024, p. 512). In line with the development of new fluid models of career, trends such as delayering, downsizing, and outsourcing have reduced opportunities for traditional linear organisational career paths associated with objective career success (Heslin, 2005). Concomitantly, subjective evaluations have come to the forefront of studies of career success (Cohen et al., 2004; Dries et al., 2008). Heslin (2005) suggests alternative methods for conceptualising and measuring subjective career success by exploring what individual employees actually want, how they seek to define their career success, and by using more qualitative methods. Such an approach is specifically taken within our own study.

Personal and contextual influences on career success

Human capital variables such as education and work experience influence levels of objective career success (Bradley et al., 2009) and demographic characteristics will influence an individual's levels of subjective career success. For example, increased age appears to lead to decreased satisfaction and quality of education is linked to positive intrinsic success, whilst length of service leads to a negative effect (Judge et al., 1995 cited in Bradley et al., 2009, p. 109).

Linked to the need for a gendered lens discussed earlier, research has found that women consider subjective outcomes as being more important than men. For example, feelings of achievement, development, challenging work, their relationships with others, and particularly opportunities where there are chances to help others (Konrad et al., 2000). Furthermore, women generally have more responsibilities outside of work which can make it difficult to subscribe to more traditional and linear career paths. Career success is commonly seen as a desirable or positive state (Arthur et al., 2005). Therefore, it is important to understand notions of career success in order to understand the best practices for achieving it, how personal characteristics are related to it, and how planned or unplanned life events might affect the road to career success (Spurk et al., 2019).

For mid-life women, there is recognition that notions of career success for an individual may be very influenced by different value parameters, particularly when this is mediated by the requirement to take on caring responsibilities. We argue that the point at which they take on that caring responsibility may be crucial to their career decisions and consequently on their conceptualisations of career success. Providing informal adult care can potentially affect careers in a number of ways that conform to the opting-out or pushed-out perspectives often categorising women's experiences (see review in Seibert et al., 2024, pp. 519–20). For carers this could mean leaving work or taking early retirement, reducing working hours, and not taking up developmental opportunities (Carmichael & Charles, 2003; Van Houtven et al., 2013). Indeed, 36% of women surveyed in a recent State of Caring Survey (2018) by Carers UK noted that their work had been negatively impacted by caring. Hutton and Hirst (2000) reported that carers suffer worse working conditions than their colleagues. Studies indicate that carers have perceptions of the types of job roles they believe they would be able to carry out in combination with their caring and possible working practices of organisations, (particularly in terms of flexibility), which means they may not apply for roles (Arksey & Glendinning, 2008; Carmichael et al., 2008). Working carers also demonstrate longer length of service

records with the same employer than non-carers, indicating a potential lack of mobility that might inhibit career development (Carers, 2016).

Towards a 'person in context'-focused understanding of career and career success

The foregoing review has presented how, in recent years, the definition of career success has expanded to incorporate achievements and career experiences that are both objective and subjective. This recognises that objective success can be affected by circumstances outside of an individual's control and also the agency that someone can have on their own career success and, ultimately, on their own development. This is particularly important to an adequate exploration of women's careers, which have been found to be affected more by structural and societal dimensions (such as the predominance of caring responsibilities), while subjective notions of career success have been found to be more important. However, there is a dearth of empirical studies, particularly qualitative research, which allow research participants to provide the criteria for their own career success (Arthur et al., 2005; McDonald & Hite, 2008), particularly over time (Seibert et al., 2024, p. 526).

Moreover, given that the HRD literature on career development has remained in the periphery for some time, academics within the HRD field (De Vos et al., 2020; McDonald et al., 2022) have recently been calling for renewed attention to career development (Shirmohammadi et al., 2020). Importantly, and with direct relevance to our study, there is a particular call for consideration of the career development of under-researched groups (Shirmohammadi et al., 2020). Our research directly addresses this gap by providing a qualitative study of a group of mid-life women who were also informal carers of dependent adults. These research participants were allowed to define their own perspectives of career success and specific attention was paid to the dimensions of a sustainable career perspective, namely the *person*, the *context*, and *time* (De Vos et al., 2020).

Methodology and methods

This study specifically sought to examine women's changing conceptualisations and perceptions of their career success considering unpaid caring of dependent adults. Within an interpretive paradigm, knowledge is viewed as subjectively constructed through lived experiences and, as a result, accepting multiple views of reality is premised on individual interpretations and subjective sense making (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Yanow, 2014). Additionally, an individual's stream of consciousness is set within its own social context, practices, and collective presuppositions (Yanow, 2014). Taking an interpretive approach demands an element of insider knowledge by the researcher in order to be able to make sense of the data (Lacity & Janson, 1994). Both authors have long been interested in women's careers and the factors that influence their development. However, this project was born out of the shared experiences of the first author helping her mother to care for her grandmother and observing firsthand the impact that caring had on her mother's work life and formal career. Yet, the voices of our participants are shared in their own words to explore this phenomenon directly in relation to their own

experiences. This is why we also present individual examples in detail in the following sections.

Data collection

This study sought to understand the perceptions of the women participants and their experiences, and draws upon their subjective knowledge as opposed to seeking to make universal conclusions (Denscombe, 2010). Of particular interest is studying the life events and transitions of individuals. 'Life course refers to a sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time' (Giele & Elder, 1998, p. 22)., Specifically, calendar interviewing was used, which produces interviews that are both reflective and retrospective exploring the events, associated behaviours and emotions, and are thus thought to help participants remember things more clearly (Belli & Callegaro, 2009). The event history calendar is represented in the form of a matrix to help participants recall particular times and events. The inclusion of specific events is common, for example the turning point of when individuals became carers, within an account of their life-course (Nelson, 2010) or in other words, the career shock. Adding open-ended interview questions allowed for exploration of events, creating an autobiographical narrative framework (Harris & Parisi, 2007; Nelson, 2010).

Calendar interviews were undertaken with thirty mid-life women with experience of providing informal care for dependent adults in Leicestershire in the UK whilst working. Mid-life was defined as being between 45 and 65 years (capturing the period some 15 years into a career-see Mainiero & Gibson, 2018). Leicester is the largest and most ethnically diverse city in the East Midlands and, at the time of data collection, 11% of the population were carers with mid-life women providing the greatest levels of care (Leicester City Council, 2013; Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2013). Data collection ceased at the end of 2016 when, upon reflection, no new insights were elucidated from interviews.

Initially, a focus group was held to facilitate participant involvement in the research design including the interview schedule and calendar, helping to ensure relevance of the research questions and ensuring that experiences of participants remained central to data collection (Aldridge, 2015). To enable a life course perspective, calendar interviews reviewed key events, behaviours, and emotions over the length of their education, formal and informal work history, and caring responsibilities (Belli & Callegaro, 2009). These were co-constructed by the first author and participants during the interview by drawing on significant life events, transitions, and career history.

Further open-ended interview questions provided additional opportunities for participants to explain events, creating an autobiographical narrative (Harris & Parisi, 2007;
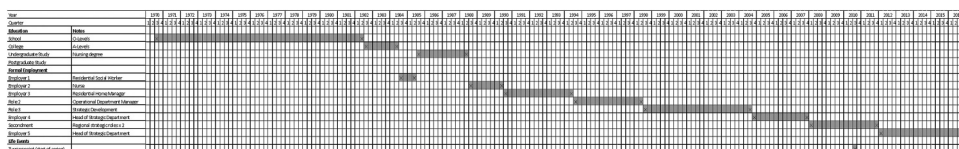

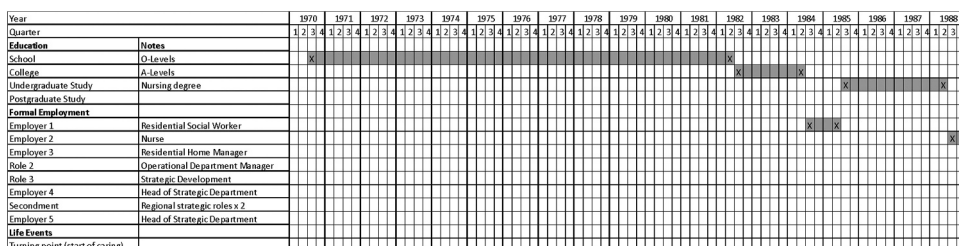**Figure 1.** Wendy's event history calendar.

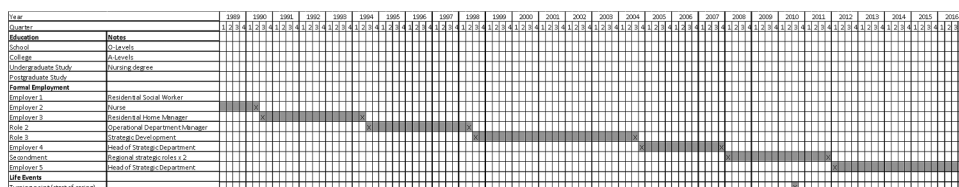**Figure 2.** Wendy's event history calendar 1970–1988.

Figure 3. Wendy's event history calendar 1989–2016.

Nelson, 2010). Whilst an interview tool to aid the memory recall of participants (Belli & Callegaro, 2009), the calendar allows for visual representation of key events and life transitions in addition to analysing interview transcripts. For an example see Figures 1–3. Interviews explored both caring and employment journeys and included specific questions relevant to career success, for example: How would you define career success?, Do you think your caring responsibilities have influenced your career success? and Have your notions of career success changed since you started caring?

Upon receiving ethical approval, all interviews were conducted, digitally recorded, and transcribed by the first author between June and December 2016. Typically, interviews lasted for an average of 60 minutes with a range of 60–180 minutes. In total, 755 pages of transcript were produced based on font size 11 and text being double-spaced. Participants were invited to review interview transcripts and no changes were advised. The combination of participant-informed interviews with the event history calendar interviewing facilitated focus on the intersections between person, context, and time (De Vos et al., 2020).

Purposeful, snowball, and self-selection sampling methods (Patton, 2002) were used to ensure essential elements of sample selection were met: identifying as women, within the core age range (45–65 years), with experience of informal care for dependent adults whilst working. Participants did not have to be in employment at the time of interview but were required to have had experience of combining work and care. This is because we recognise the prevalence of carers finding no alternative but to cease employment due to caring (Carers UK, 2019). Posters advertising the study and inviting participation were displayed in various locations, including places of work, community groups, and charities. Efforts were made to use language in the advertisements sympathetic to those who did not necessarily self-identify as carers. Indeed, we align our research with Milne and Larkin's (2015) definition of carers as a family member who supplies unpaid care to someone in their family or a friend who is dependent on them. Care was not defined

Table 1. Ethnicity of research participants.

Ethnicity	Number of participants
White	
British	19
Other	1
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups	
White and Black Caribbean	1
Other mixed	2
Asian/Asian British	7

Table 2. Employment status of participants.

Employment Status	Number of participants
Employed	22
Self-employed	3
Retired	2
Unemployed	3

Table 3. Occupation of employed participants.

Occupation	Number of participants
Managers, Directors & Senior Officials	4
Professional Occupations	11
Associate Professional & Technical Occupations	3
Caring, leisure & other service occupations	2
Sales & Customer Service Occupations	2
Administrative & Secretarial Occupations	2
Skilled Trades Occupations	1

beyond this so could include, for example, practical and/or emotional support. Participants self-identified as meeting the above criteria and further participants were recruited by recommendations from these contacts.

Ethnic diversity was sought to better reflect the diversity of the Leicestershire area, where 33% of the population come from ethnically minoritised groups. Eventually, nineteen women from a White British background took part, with the second largest grouping being seven women of Asian/Asian British background. Classifications of ethnicity in Table 1 are in line with those given during census collection (Office for National Statistics [ONS], n.d). Participants ranged in age from 45 to 63. Most participants were between the ages of 50 and 59. 21 participants had children (of varying ages). Table 2 indicates participant employment status. Those who were working/in paid employment at the time of the interview worked in a range of different positions with most occupying professional occupations. Occupations outlined in Table 3 are in line with the standard occupational classification structure offered in census data collection (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2010).

Examining rigour in qualitative research, we followed the course of Ridgway and Kirk (2021, p. 754) in reflecting Golden-Biddle and Locke's (1993) evaluative criteria of authenticity, plausibility, and criticality. Herein, in terms of authenticity, detailed contextual information related to the participants is provided offering an in-depth understanding of the phenomena studied. We find our work plausible given ongoing discussions of objective and subjective career success, and conceptualisations relating

to sustainable careers (De Vos et al., 2020) and expanding novel notions of career success, taking account of the caring context. Finally, criticality is embedded in understanding the different and unique challenges of caring for dependent adults, questioning the literature regarding conceptualising career success and recognising the unique challenges that working women carers face.

Data analysis

Bearing in mind Creswell (2013) stages of qualitative data analysis, interview data was prepared through transcription by the first author in 2016. Analysis started in 2017 with developing thematic categories from the interview guide and iterative sensemaking from the focus group and interviews. The data was then coded by the first author using NVivo software and reviewed by the second author. The focus of analysis within this article is how participants defined career success following the turning point or career shock of becoming a carer. The methods and analysis therefore encompassed the dimensions relevant to the sustainable career concept, namely: person, context, and time (De Vos et al., 2020). Following more recent publication on sustainable careers (e.g. De Vos et al., 2020), the data was re-visited by the first author and interviews re-coded in light of objective and subjective career success indicators and again reviewed by the second author. The first author also maintained a reflexive journal. The data was re-visited and further analysed in 2023 to focus on the notion of career success. Presented in a similar vein to Mavin and Grandy (2016), an extract from the codebook is provided in Table 4 with node(s) relevant to the research questions presented as an example. Following the work of Shirmohammadi et al. (2023), we provide details on how we upheld trustworthiness and met criteria for rigour in qualitative research (Levitt et al., 2018) in Table 5.

Verbatim quotations from participants are used with pseudonyms (chosen by the participants) to preserve anonymity. Beyond this, participant vignettes are provided. Due to the nature of the data and following in the footsteps of others (see Taylor, 2004; De Vos et al., 2020, for example), details are provided on their changing conceptualisations of career success following the turning point of becoming carers. In particular, De Vos et al. (2020) examined sustainable careers with three cases, one of which illustrated juggling work and family responsibilities.

Given the interpretive and the 'insider' approach, fieldwork and findings are co-constructed both by the researcher and the participants (England, 1994). Whilst recognised as significant, reflexivity itself is not clearly defined (Wilkinson, 1988). Reflexivity as introspection calls to a researcher's own experiences and their interest in the subject (Finlay, 2002). The motivations for the project were always explained to participants. Whilst conducting interviews, the first author could relate personally to frustrations about women's careers in general but otherwise could only show a certain amount of empathy and understanding having not lived through many of the experiences that participants recounted. It was recognised that participants may have been interested in the first author's limited experiences of caring and have questions for her. As a result, she was not perceived as an outsider (Johnson, 2009). When comfortable, personal information was freely shared with participants to assist in the building of rapport. Given there

Table 4. Conceptualising career success and examples of quotations.

Code Name	Code description	Number of sources coded	Number of coded references within the sub-code	Example quotations
Career success	Perception pre-turning point: Objective: financial stability	30	3	I used to be driven financially but I'm not at all now. Having stability and a good salary and being able to keep up to date with skills.
	Perception pre-turning point: Objective: progression	30	2	it's not … I guess the immediate sort of thing that would spring into my mind is about sort of progression, and probably 10 years ago I would have fully endorsed all of the things I'm about to say. I don't fully endorse them anymore. I think it's about progression. Sometimes it can be about, sort of, an upward progression in terms of status and achievement. You know that you have chances to, to grow, progress.
	Perception pre-turning point: Objective: Recognition	30	1	I used to say, as long as you give me a pat on a head and a peanut every once in a while I will actually go the extra mile and do a good job.
	Perception post-turning point: Objective: financial stability	30	2	I would like to progress in my career. So that I can do my 9–5 and be in a position to pay someone to sit with Mum, even if it's overnight, so that I do get the rest that I need and not to do the weekend stuff and actually have quality time, be able to take her out and do stuff that I really want to do. If that makes sense. So for me success now is a) obviously me sort of earning more and being more secure I suppose in what I do.
	Perception post turning point: Objective: responsibility	30	1	Yeah, yeah. Progression. I've not progressed from [caring profession role], or a [more senior role] and then [more senior role] or you know, to taking on that responsibility – would be too much energy used up and then I wouldn't have enough for home. I can't take responsibility at home as well as that. It has to, you know, has to, yeah … too much responsibility wouldn't be, yeah.
	Perception post-turning point: Subjective: reputation	30	3	Career success is about, that combination of using your experience to do work which is stretching, enjoyable, delivering a great job for people, reputation. Career success for me is around, about the reputation that you have, what people say about you when you're not there.
	Perception post turning point: Subjective: adding value and being valued	30	3	I now tend to think … it's actually about sort of, job satisfaction, feeling valued and actually producing key outputs. I think more about it in terms of value, both in terms of the value that I provide, but also, you know that value is then acknowledged and I feel valued Well I think I bring value; and that for me is success.

Table 4. (Continued).

Code Name	Code description	Number of sources coded	Number of coded references within the sub-code	Example quotations
	Perception post-turning point: Subjective: helping others	30	8	If my success is defined by being able to help and support people then no. Because I can still do that and I get students . . . the students that I first took on as personal tutor graduated about six weeks ago and you know, I've had some lovely feedback and cards from them about how I support them. And so no, it hasn't, if that is success. If that's how I define success then no it hasn't, it hasn't been affected. If I saw success in terms of, you know, being Head [of Department], then yes it has, but I don't, I don't see it like that. To me, career is not about moving up the management structure and being [caring senior role], that's to me that's never been my goal or my aspiration. It's been more sort of hands on with patients. So, career success, I would say, yeah I'm still in [role] so that's a success I think for the [caring] profession. I'm good at my job.
	Perception post-turning point: Subjective: Enjoyment – fulfilment	30	7	I think it would be difficult for me to do a job I didn't like. So I think, you enjoying something that you're doing because you're doing it well and so you've been successful in doing that.
	Perception post-turning point: Subjective: Work-life balance	30	2	So I think that was for me, I suppose, that's success, the success criteria is a decent work life balance. So I think, I think if you can, career success, I think if you can have the balance in your personal life.

was an expectation of participant openness and trust, it only felt fair to share back, a strategy also endorsed by other researchers (for example, Johnson, 2009).

Findings – perceptions of career success

Careers and the turning point

All participants spoke of their caring responsibilities for dependent adults having an impact on their careers. Completion of event history calendars allowed for discussion of significant life events, specifically participant life contexts including the turning point. Here, individuals could pinpoint when in their life they felt they became a carer of adult dependents and then discuss the impact this had on their notions of career success.

Table 5. Meeting criteria for trustworthiness and rigour.

Criteria	Description	Strategies adopted in this study
Credibility	Researchers to demonstrate representation of multiple realities of the phenomenon under study.	Member checks: We shared transcripts with participants alongside a summary of findings. No participants challenged transcripts or disagreed with the findings. Peer debriefing: Two members of the wider research team examined how well the analysis represented the different constructions of reality in the data presented here. Reflexive journal: The first author shared a reflexive journal for the project with the second author to enable reflection on decisions made during the study.
Transferability	Researchers need to provide descriptions necessary to enable applying the findings in other contexts.	Thick description: We offer a variety of representative quotations and vignettes in the findings section of the paper. These are contextualised and discussed more widely. Purposive sampling: We used the purposeful sampling approach to examine notions of career success in women with adult care responsibilities. Discussion of the broad application of findings: We discuss the implications for career management and HRD professionals which are transferrable to wider conceptualisations of career success beyond formal notions.
Dependability	Researchers need to show that the findings are consistent and could be repeated.	Triangulation of data source: Data were collected from 30 participants with experience of care and caring, but within different contexts. Consistency checks: We checked consistency at different data collection and analysis steps which involved authors independently checking transcripts and codes as described in the methods section. Throughout the data collection procedure, the first author listened to the recordings and transcribed all interviews as soon as they were conducted. She coded all transcripts with the second author reviewing all codes. In cases of disagreement, codes were further discussed to conclusion.
Confirmability	Researchers need to demonstrate a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest.	Reflexive journal: In a reflexive journal, major decisions were documented following discussion throughout the research process. Reflective discussion: Upon application for funding, and through meetings before the data collection started, the first author shared her own experiences of helping care for her grandmother and thus her motivation for the project. Sharing this with participants led to increased rapport and deep reflection by participants and gratitude for recognising the challenges of combining work and caring and the authors' genuine interest in the project. That said, for confirmability purposes it was also important for participants to be able to check the transcripts and to include reflexive journalling, ongoing discussions between researchers during data collection, ensuring openness. Etic or outsider's perspective: The second author provided an outsider's perspective in respect of caring whilst working to offer an alternative perspective to the first author's during data collection and analysis.

Career success criteria – traditional and objective

As part of the calendar interview, participants were asked what career success meant to them. Often, they responded with traditional objective notions of careers referring to a formal (paid) setting that did not include their caring activities. Within this, five participants looked to objective and individualised measures as indicators of career success (for example salary and upwards career moves) and considered themselves to have less successful careers than those who looked to subjective indicators (for example job satisfaction and being able to make a difference in their work). Take Rachel (White Other and working part-time in education) for example: she considered career success to be having a full-time, paid job, a clear progression path, and opportunities to grow. As such, she did not consider herself to be successful due to a lack of time to devote to her role, noting that her priorities had shifted to caring for her family (both dependent children and her mother). When specifically asked if her notions of career success had changed due to caring, she replied: 'I think just accepting the situation and completely reducing my expectations or anything. I don't have any aspirations any longer'.

Career success criteria – objective and subjective

Seven participants considered both objective and subjective measures as indicators of success. Noreen (White British and working four days a week in corporate development) directly referred to the different definitions which could be ascribed to notions of career success. She noted,

> Well I guess there are the two definitions that I'd use and my, my definition would be – I really like my job and I think they pay a reasonable amount for it and . . . they're flexible and can meet my needs. The other definition would be, the more . . . a male driven I think . . . , career path, onward, upwards, earn increasing amounts of money, get a decent pension.

She then declared that on the basis of the subjective element of her definition she viewed herself as having a successful career in the wake of her caring role.

Career success criteria – moving from the objective individual to the subjective collective

Nevertheless, eighteen participants looked specifically to subjective indicators of career success. They described how their notions of success had changed over *time* following the turning point of recognising themselves as a carer. Indeed, Mary (White British and working full time) said *'Caring has given me a different viewpoint'*. Participants indicated that they used to prioritise objective measures of career success which included: achievements, promotion; and career progression; financial stability; and employment flexibility. Yet what was more important now were greater indicators of subjective and group notions of career success. These included: enjoyment of work or job satisfaction; reputation; emotional well-being; adding value, helping people and making a difference through their work; and balance, and being able to provide the care that they wanted to, taking account of moving a focus from the individual to the collective. For example, self-employed Carol (White British) noted:

> Career success is about that combination of using your experience to do work which is stretching, enjoyable, delivering a great job for people, reputation. Career success for me is around, about the reputation that you have, what people say about you when you're not there. I used to be driven financially but I'm not at all now.

Whilst Usha (British Indian), a retired teacher, reported:

> You become more humane. You try to understand difficulties, whether it's physical disability or mental disability people face. It does broaden your thinking. It does make you [a] bit wiser.

With changing conceptualisations in the wake of caring creating a career shock, taking account of subjective definitions and caring responsibilities, participants perceived themselves as being successful in their careers. They were able to look back and refer to ways they had helped people and the positive impact their work had had on both individuals and groups.

Individual examples

There are many differences between the participants such as age, type of employment, and their caring journeys. The presentation of four detailed participant cases to explore their experiences and the impact on their notions of their career success is useful, particularly as they expose a range of experiences across the sample taking account of *person, context*, and *time*.

Riha is Asian British. At the time of interview she was 51 and had one child under 18. She was employed in two jobs in the public sector and described working in excess of 40 hours per week. This was to meet mortgage payments, following the purchase of a larger property to accommodate her mother, and to provide ongoing care – something she wanted to do and culturally referred to both as a responsibility and an honour. She attributed a failure to secure a promotion in her primary role to her care activities, leaving her little time to prepare for interviews for other positions, and felt there was minimal support at her primary employer. She described caring for her mother full-time, but, whilst working so many paid hours, Riha felt she was not providing the levels of care for her mother that she wished to. Due to her caring, Riha felt she had not 'put enough' into her formal career development and when asked about career success stated that she had been "unsuccessful", noting

> I just can't be bothered. If I'm honest. I just need to get through each hour of every day. I think, 'oh what's going to happen when I get home? What mess am I going to find? What's tonight gonna be like? Am I going to get some sleep?'.

Pre- and post-turning point, Riha viewed career success objectively, which meant individual progression and greater financial reward. However, post-turning point this was because she sought to afford a care worker to help with her caring responsibilities and help achieve balance in her life, facilitating more quality time with her mother. Therefore, whilst her conceptualisation remained objective in the wake of the turning point, it was explicitly informed by caring, to enable her to meet her caring responsibilities, moving beyond individual considerations. She noted,

I would like to progress in my career. So that I can do my 9–5 and be in a position to pay someone to sit with Mum, even if it's overnight, so that I do get the rest that I need and not to do the weekend stuff and actually have quality time, be able to take her out and do stuff that I really want to do.

Hannah is White British. At the time of interview she was 47. She was employed working full-time hours Monday to Friday, in education, with informal flexible working arrangements. On average she provided 21 hours of care for her mother per week, sharing responsibility with her brothers, but felt the expectation was that she provided the personal care her mother needed. At work, Hannah needed to complete a further qualification to progress but did not feel that she had the time to do it, caring being a contributory factor. Hannah wanted to continue working and *'to carry on having interesting challenging projects'* that she was successful in. Meanwhile, when asked about career success in the wake of caring, she responded:

I guess the immediate sort of thing that would spring into my mind is about sort of progression, and probably 10 years ago I would have fully endorsed all of the things I'm about to say. I don't fully endorse them anymore. I think it's about progression. Sometimes it can be about, sort of, an upward progression in terms of status and achievement. I now tend to think . . . I think it's actually about sort of, job satisfaction, feeling valued.

Thus, for Hannah, her conceptualisations had specifically moved from objective to subjective notions following the turning point.

Geetu is Asian British. At the time of interview she was 58 and had two children over the age of 18. She was not in current paid employment due to her caring responsibilities. She described caring for her disabled adult son on a full-time basis because, as a trained caring professional, she felt she provided better levels of care than had been previously provided by the state. As a result she had ceased employment. She received no support from family and said *'in [the] Asian community, you don't really talk about disability – they're just at home quiet . . . . the belief is that I may have done something cruel and nasty in my old life'*. She initially conceptualised career success as objective, referring to progression and stated:

To have, to progress in my career, I have to neglect [son's name]. And I'd have to drop my standards or not care as much.

Thus, Geetu felt she had not been successful in her career because to be so would be to not care for her son to the standard she wanted to. Yet, when asked at the end of the interview if there was anything she wanted to add, Geetu spoke positively of the volunteering role she has with a charity, giving back to others in a similar situation, saying:

I don't think I lost out by giving up, I think what I'm doing now is more valuable than a promotion, or you know, lots of money. I think money is generally thought of as success if you earn a lot, but to me, you know. I think what I do now is more successful to me . . . I've really changed my perspective.

Thus, for Geetu, the turning point had stalled her objective career success but also given her an opportunity to consider others and led to subjective notions as a result of the collective.

Table 6. Summarising the contrast between pre- and post-turning-point perceptions.

Overall	Perceptions pre-turning point	Perceptions post-turning point
	Objective and individual: achievements, promotion and career progression; financial stability; and employment flexibility	Subjective and group: enjoyment of work or job satisfaction; reputation; emotional well-being; adding value, helping people and making a difference through their work; and balance, and being able to provide the care that they wanted to, taking account of moving a focus from the individual to the collective.
Example: Hannah (see quotes above)	Progression, status, achievement	Job satisfaction, feeling valued
Example: Dawn (education)	Linear career path *'Working your way up. So that means I'm not successful!'.*	Making a difference in the lives of others. *'I see my students graduate, and that for me is success . . . So now I think it's not just making a difference for my students, it's making a difference for people with learning disabilities and that's something I'm really passionate about'.*
Example: Fiona (education)	Financial independence *'Having stability and a good salary . . . I would say somebody in a full time job with a proper salary and a proper pension'.*	Making a difference in the lives of others *'I think some of the things I do are quite specialised, and I helped make some changes . . . and trying to educate people'.*

Christine is White British. At the time of interview she was 58 and had two adult children. She had retired from paid employment in the public sector quite recently due to her ill health. On average, she cared for her husband, her mother, and her uncle for 10 hours per week. Over her life course she had cared for six adults with different conditions and described the significant impact that caring had had on her career. Initially, when reflecting on career success, Christine said it was about reputation and how one is perceived by others. Her caring responsibilities had changed her perceptions of career success a little as when asked about the impact of caring she replied:

> You asked what success is – living a happy life and knowing that you've done your best by your relatives is the success. That's my definition of success. It has never been about the money or a job title, or and you know, that I've helped people; it means a lot to me.

Here, for Christine, career success had always been of a subjective nature, but her perceptions of it had further developed to include knowing that her formal career had still enabled her to provide the levels of informal care that she wanted to for her relatives, achieving balance, but also being able to help others going through the same thing, focusing again on the collective over the individual.

In summary, the perceptions of career success held by participants evolved post-turning point of becoming a carer. Whilst for some this remained objective, it was informed by caring such as needing a more senior role for increased pay to help with caring. Alternatively, eighteen participants specifically looked to subjective indicators to help them conceptualise career success and, in many cases, this took them away from thinking about themselves as individuals but more about what they could do for the collective. A summary and example of Hannah can be found in Table 6.

Discussion and implications

This article explores the impact of informal caring on perspectives of career success of a group of mid-life women in the UK. Calendar interviews provided an opportunity to track women's formal careers over time, exploring both objective and subjective measures of success. For all participants, taking up informal caring was a turning point in their careers which led to changing perceptions of what career success was going forward.

Theoretical contributions

First, our study makes a contribution to knowledge by filling an empirical research gap around this group of mid-life women who are under-researched but are the dominant providers of care. This is an important opportunity to study the effects of career shock or turning point on their perspectives on career success.

Second, the study makes a contribution to the wider literature on career success in understanding how the turning point affects notions of career success. Holding traditional objective criteria of career success left a minority of participants claiming that following the turning point of becoming a carer that they no longer had a career or felt they had not had career success at all. As is the case with other general studies of careers (e.g. Heslin, 2005), those participants who looked to objective measures of success considered themselves to have less successful careers than those participants who described subjective indicators.

However, what is more significant is the finding that the turning point of becoming a carer led to distinct changes in the way that career success was defined. Half of the participants explicitly discussed how they used to look to traditional notions of careers and objective measures of career success but that this had changed over *time* and in relation to *private life context*, following the turning point of becoming a carer. For these participants, subjective dimensions had become more important; to be able to add value in their work and roles but also to feel valued and acknowledged. Their measures of success had adapted and become enjoyment of work, reputation, making a difference through their work and having work-life balance, recognising their limited agency in responding to combining work and caring. Seibert et al. (2024, p. 512) cautions against the more recent academic emphasis on aspects of subjective career success to the exclusion of objective career success as a 'luxury of the WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) (Henrich et al., 2010) samples which are often the focus of career research (Inkson et al., 2012)'. However, what our study shows is that in this case, the changed perspective to emphasise the subjective over the objective was not a luxury but a necessity or requirement for these women to make sense of their careers within changed circumstances. Indeed, some of them would not be considered to live in privileged circumstances by any means. In this way, our research allows us to extend literature on shaping of career transitions in mid-life to specifically include effects of decisions around care responsibilities on perspectives on career success.

Furthermore, our findings support recent scholarly recommendations to take up the notion of sustainable careers whereby work aligns with individual strengths and employ-ability allowing for combining life and work (Valcour, 2017). Calendar interviews allowed for the study of the development of careers over *time*, related to each individual

person, and within the specific *context* of this sample of mid-life women providing informal care (De Vos et al., 2020). Following the caring turning point, individuals set their own multidimensional criteria for success (Arthur et al., 2005; Heslin, 2005; McDonald & Hite, 2008). Career success for them was based on their own individual values, i.e. a significantly better work-life balance, enabling them to meet caring requirements alongside formal employment. We have termed this the person-in-context notion of career success.

It is important to examine differing determinants of career success as contributing to a sustainable career utilising the dimensions in De Vos et al. (2020). We were able to apply these dimensions to real-life experiences and conceptualisations of career success in the wake of the turning point of becoming a carer. Seibert et al. (2024, p. 526) note that the sustainable career perspective facilitates the inclusion of mental and physical health within understandings of career success, something which certainly formed part of our findings. However in addition, our study allows this to be extended to include the health of dependents. Being able to care properly for their dependents became an important subjective criteria of career success whether this related to accommodations and/or adjustments to paid work, or indeed to the specific caring skills developed through caring. Whilst the study of health and productivity (De Vos et al., 2020) was beyond the realms of our research, we adopted a systemic perspective and considered the important dimensions of sustainable careers in influencing career success in the wake of a career shock, that of becoming and recognising oneself as a carer of a dependent adult, informing the interactions of these dimensions. In so doing, we responded to calls for methods to understand individual changes over *time* in *personal contexts*, recognising the unique challenges of caring for dependent adults (Seibert et al., 2024, p. 526).

Practical contributions

In respect of these person-in-context notions of careers and career success, what can the HRD function do to develop and support individuals with adult care responsibilities and their careers? Oldridge (2019) provides a useful review of organisational support provision for carers and highlights that such support rarely includes career development interventions. Contrastingly, a recent CIPD (2016) report indicates that only 13% of organisations offered training to line managers to assist them managing working carers. The relevance of this to considerations of career success is that, due to lack of support, carers may feel they have to change their notions of what a successful career is, often putting them at a disadvantage compared to their male and non-carer counterparts.

Oldridge (2019) suggests that what is needed within organisations to support carers is a personalised approach and focus of resources. The same applies here with considerations of career development and career success. Specifically, in pursuing sustainable careers, organisations need to recognise the strengths and interests of individuals, allowing for the enmeshing of work and life in *context* (Valcour, 2017). HRD practitioners need to support managers to recognise the needs of the individual *person*, the caring *context* in intersection with their paid work and understand that women's careers develop differently and not always in a linear way over *time* (De Vos et al., 2020). McDonald et al. (2022) call for HRD

practitioners to coach and train line managers in managing current challenges (in the specific case of their research, remote work), which includes managing career conversations with employees with adult care responsibilities and reviewing internal measures of success, beyond objective setting (McDonald & Hite, 2008). HRD practitioners can influence the development of organisational cultures and assist in making these more accommodating to flexible work schedules needed by carers (Hite & McDonald, 2020).

As identified by Greenhaus and Kossek (2014), organisations should be supporting individuals to pursue success in ways which can integrate work and non-work roles, in this case informal caring, and look to see if there are transferrable skills which could benefit the individual and the organisation (McDonald & Hite, 2008; Oldridge, 2019). Ultimately, there remains a need for the HRD function to assist employees in taking control of their careers, and in coaching and training line managers (Shuck et al., 2018). Managers need to understand how individual employees define career success in their own right and champion women (and other under-represented employees) (McDonald & Hite, 2008). Failure to adapt may mean carers leaving the organisation and indeed the workforce in general (Oldridge, 2019). This is particularly important as, globally, we are facing a shortage of care needs being met formally and we continue to rely on friends and family to provide much needed care. Thus, this issue is only going to grow.

Limitations of the study

Limitations can be discussed from both a methodological and theoretical perspective. This research study is obviously limited in its scope, based on a small sample within one UK metropolitan area. However, the in-depth qualitative nature of the study was important in allowing career success to be conceptualised within the life history context of the participants themselves. Given the dominance of mid-life women within informal caring in many countries, it would be useful to replicate this study in different national contexts in the future. In addition, we tried to ensure ethnic diversity within the sample and indeed noted that there were aspects relating to cultural expectations about informal caring that were very predominant and specific for the Asian British participants. The impact of culture on career success perceptions was not explicitly explored here, leading to a potential fruitful area for future research.

Additionally, the intersection of informal caring with age and career transitions and perceptions of career success has also been flagged as an interesting area of future research. This is particularly around care for dependent adults (rather than for children where there tends to be more state and organisational support provision). Here we were specifically interested in mid-life women; however, the position of young carers and career transition and success measures has been identified as an area of interest and may provide another replication opportunity. This would continue the testing of the applicability of existing dimensions of career success and models of careers.

Furthermore, De Vos et al. (2020) recognise that no one piece of academic work can be expected to examine all factors relating to sustainable careers and, indeed, our study focuses on one factor in relation to person, context, and time in the wake of a career shock of becoming a carer. However, this focus could well be extended.

Conclusion

Overall, the accounts of the participants in this article speak to the changing nature of career success, evolving beyond objective measures to specifically react to or to consider caring responsibilities in later life. This analysis responds to calls for qualitative research to understand career success of an under-represented group. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge the careers of individuals who do not, and/or cannot, subscribe to traditional notions of careers and their development. Here, we have suggested that in order to maintain sustainable careers for individuals, as a key stakeholder, HRD practitioners should take account of changing career success conceptualisations to reflect this, thereby developing effective career development systems. Failure to do so may lead to mid-life women with caring responsibilities leaving organisations.

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