The Boundaryless Career: 
Is There a Disparity between Theory, 
Practice and Worker Desire in 
Relation to Older Workers?

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for the degree of 
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Declaration

This is to certify that:

1. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma to me.

11. To the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

111. Editing by others has been limited to style and grammar. Editing by others has not involved substantive content.

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Patrick Bernard McCarthy

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Date
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Abstract

This thesis examines the capacity and desire of older workers to provide discretionary effort and skilled contributions in what some researchers consider to be the predominant form of new career, ‘the boundaryless career’. Features of the ‘boundaryless career’ include multiple employers, and the demise of the organisational loyalty that was embodied within the image of the ‘company man’. The research is justified by the fall in Australia’s fertility rates and the simultaneous ageing of Australia’s population. In combination, these are predicted to produce significant shortfalls in skilled labour, which experts believe will require organisations to better manage and utilise its older workers.

The case study and pattern matching methodology involved interviews with forty volunteer older workers who worked in the headquarters of Australia Post, which enjoys a formidable local and international reputation. ‘Career plateau’ was a term used by many to describe their perception of their current career position and prospects. Their descriptions of their work situation and their ambitions, at work and in retirement, were analysed for patterns which were then compared with literature on career plateaus, motivation and job design, and the ‘boundaryless career’. This analysis was overlaid onto a foundation of contemporary management practice with regard to older workers, current business environments and issues, and views on the skill sets needed for the future. This foundation emerged from a review of academic literature, business and government reports and from an ongoing review of the Australian Financial Review over the six years of the study.

Contributions to theory and practice are claimed in the parent theories of career plateau, and older worker motivation; together with the focus theory of boundaryless careers.

Although there are legitimate organisational constraints on optimising the older worker contribution, older workers do not contribute to capacity, and organisations do little to optimise their contribution. Joint organisational and individual worker attention to skills maintenance and career management over an entire working life will likely be
needed to prevent future generations following the embedded, poor skill development practices of the current cohort of older workers. Organisations will need to eliminate age-based discriminatory attitudes and systems and replace them with inclusive, merit-based processes to satisfy older workers’ desires for respect and equity.

The career plateau construct has been found to be negative, self-fulfilling and imprecise, but it proved a useful, non-threatening avenue for discussion about an individual’s perception of their workplace situation. The substantial body of research and literature surrounding motivation, including that supporting enabling processes such as participative practices, was found to apply to older workers. However, this body of research on what motivates workers has not been considered within the academic literature related to the ‘boundaryless career’.

The ‘boundaryless career’ construct, as the predominant form of new career, was found to be unsuitable for most older workers. The boundaryless construct was found to be more appropriately a descriptor of today’s organisation and its operating environment rather than an appropriate description of the older workers in the study who generally displayed organisational loyalty. Although older workers possess the general skills and attributes for the future workforce, as suggested by research conducted for the Business Council of Australia, their technical skills tend to be organisation and job position specific and they have not been upgraded in ways other than on-the-job learning. In common with Australian trends, organisational and job tenure was extensive in many cases and, aside from the adverse effects on learning of excessive job tenure, tended to provide contradictory evidence to the assertion by many careers theorists that the ‘company man’ has been consigned to history.

Today’s boundaryless organisation and its bounded older workers are polar opposites in transition. Time can be expected to produce greater alignment of values and satisfaction of organisational and older worker needs, but the overall future direction is likely to be ‘boundaryless’ for both organisations and the older workforce.
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1.1 Research objective

1.1.1 Overview

Some career researchers claim that the ‘boundaryless career’ is the emerging and predominant form of new career.

The intent of this research is to test the validity of the ‘boundaryless career’ construct and to assess the attractiveness of a ‘boundaryless career’ to older workers, many of whom regard their career as having plateaued. The research is set within the context of the government objective to encourage greater workforce participation by older workers (Costello, 2002, p. 2).

Chapter 1 describes the reasoning behind the research objective, the justification for the research, and the methodology for addressing the complex and interwoven issues that underpin the productive employment of older workers in extended working lives.

1.1.2 Definitions: ‘older worker’, ‘boundaryless’, ‘plateau’

Although there is no universal definition of the ‘older worker’, the Australian Law Reform Commission advise that there is growing tendency in policy development to define ‘older workers as those being over forty-five years of age’ (Australian Law Reform Commission, 2002). The International Labour Office (ILO), with recommendation 162, defines ‘older workers’ as all those who are liable to encounter
difficulties in employment and occupation because of advancement of age’ (ILO Library Information Desk, 2007). As the researcher was aware of a great deal of anecdotal evidence that people over the age of forty were subjected to age-based discrimination in Australia, and because an earlier study into ageing at work, that had been managed by this researcher, had found evidence of age discrimination occurring from age forty, workers aged forty years and over were determined as ‘older workers’ for this study.

Crocitto (1998) observed an over-riding impression that the traditional, predictable and hierarchical career was being replaced by a ‘boundaryless career’; a career that is managed by individuals rather than organisations, a ‘multifaceted phenomenon involving navigation across employers, market confirmation, one’s knowledge and choices, and connections to networks of a social and professional nature’.

The *Macquarie Dictionary* defines ‘plateauing’ ‘as a period of little or no progress in an individual’s learning, marked by temporary constancy in speed, number of errors committed, etc., and indicated by a flat stretch on a graph’. Chapter 3.3 provides scholarly definitions and discussion of the literature surrounding career plateau.

### 1.2 Background: changing demographics

There has been increasing and well-documented interest, by governments around the world and by media, business and general communities, into the many implications of population ageing, declining birth rates and consequential skilled labour shortages (Carone & Costello, 2006). The pre-eminent management theorist, Peter Drucker (1999), considered that the implications of population ageing represented the most significant challenge to management for the twenty-first century.

In Australia’s case, the Federal Government produced its Intergenerational Report (Costello, 2002) and during 2003 declared population ageing to be one of the government’s ten priority areas. Australian governments at all levels fund research and encourage business to act to retain older workers. Examples of funded projects include the ARC Linkage Project titled ‘Demographic Change, Ageing and the Workforce: An Integrated Model to Inform Workforce Development and Planning in Australia’
McDonald (2004) contends that population ageing became an emergent policy issue in the 1980s ‘partly because it had not been predicted by demographic projections made in the 1970s’. The over-arching policy concern is the potential impact on standards of living, which is often measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita. The attributes of population size, the extent of participation in work and productivity determine GDP per capita. The determinants of GDP are shown in Figure 1.1.

**Figure 1.1: Contributions to economic growth**

- Population age structure
- Labour force participation rate
- Unemployment rate
- Average hours worked
- Capital deepening
- Multi-factor productivity


Projections are that in the absence of changed employment behavioural patterns, Australia will suffer a loss of GDP from annual growth rates of 2.25% during the 1990s to annual growth rates of about 1.5% for the years between 2010 and 2040 (Intergenerational Report referred to in Henry, 2004). The Intergenerational Report predicts that the size of the population over sixty-five (the traditional retirement age) will more than double over the next forty years, whereas the working-age population of fifteen to sixty-four-year-olds will grow by around 14%. An impact is that while today there are five people of working age for every person over sixty-five; this number will fall to less than three by 2042. The following Australian Treasury projections (Figure 1.2) illustrate the changing demographic shape of Australia as people live longer.
Figure 1.2: Projections of Australia’s ageing population

![Figure 1.2: Projections of Australia’s ageing population](image)


Figure 1.3 provides a different view of the same information, showing more clearly the change in the way Australia’s population will look by 2050.

Figure 1.3: The demographic shape outlook for Australia

![Figure 1.3: The demographic shape outlook for Australia](image)

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (1999): CAT No 3222.0
Population ageing has traditionally impacted the numbers of people participating in work. The Treasury projections given at Figure 1.4 show a dramatic decline in workforce participation beginning around 2005.

**Figure 1.4: Participation rate projections**

![Participation rate projections](image)


There appears to be considerable scope to improve Australia’s labour force participation rate for workers aged fifty to sixty-four as some other countries have much higher participation rates for older workers. For example, OECD (2006) report that the participation rates for the USA and New Zealand are about 10% higher than Australia’s, with the United Kingdom slightly less than 10% higher, and Sweden almost 20% higher.

The birth rate also continues to fall and impact on the shape of Australia’s demography. Figure 1.5 shows that birth rates fell dramatically during the 1970s and continued its fall to 2000. A consequence is that there is a reduced supply of young people entering the workforce whilst increasing life spans brought about by medical advances are significantly increasing the numbers of people over sixty-five, the traditional retirement age although one currently under active review.
Henry (2004) concludes that most of the avenues for arresting the fall in fertility rates have already been investigated, stating that an initiative introduced today would take ‘at least 25 to 30 years’ before a rise in the working age population numbers would occur.

McDonald (2004) considers that immigration is not a solution to Australia’s ageing population either. He points out that although post-war migration increased the Australian population significantly it had minimal impact on the country’s age structure. The trend has been for migrants to be slightly younger than the average Australian, but the migrants arrive with fewer children. McDonald’s conclusion is that reducing the problem through high levels of migrant intake is inefficient. Further, it would seem that large increases in immigration levels may be difficult to achieve, as other developed countries are experiencing similar trends. For example, fertility rates in the United Kingdom and Canada are below Australian levels and continue to fall (McDonald, 2004). Countries driven by their own GDP problems can be expected to undertake defensive steps in their own interests; consider the cases of Japan and Italy, for example.

The United Nations Secretariat – Population Division of Department of Economic and Social Affairs (Zlotnik, 2001), has estimated that the combined effect of population ageing and declining birth-rates will cause Japan’s population to decline from a current level of about 127 million people to about 109 million by the end of the twenty-first century. Similarly, Italy’s population is anticipated to fall from 57.5 million to 43 million people in the same time period.
Access Economics (1999) has added clarity to this demographic change. This leading economic research organisation reported that there are normally 170,000 new entrants into the Australian workforce each year, but this level will progressively shrink to a total of 125,000 new entrants for the entire ten years between 2020 and 2030. All writers agree that the continued employment of older workers beyond their traditional retirement age offers an opportunity to partially offset this anticipated shortfall in labour supply.

1.3 Justification for the research

1.3.1 Overview

The following discussion demonstrates that although the solution to the projected dramatic shortfall in labour appears to be partly and simply solved by an increased participation in work by older workers, there are significant implications and barriers to be overcome. The issues discussed in this section of the thesis are complex and they serve to highlight the need for good thinking, beyond the obvious. The issues embodied in the discussion go some way to explaining why business has been slow to react, and, when it has reacted, why its responses have often been contradictory. The Secretary of the Australian Treasury (Henry, May 2004) has lamented the low level of interest in what he described as ‘a quite profound public policy choice – as profound as any of the great debates of the 1980s’.

Possible reasons that organisations have been slow to respond to the demands of these changing demographics include a lack of clarity about how to respond, and how to prioritise older worker issues against the needs of other worker cohorts. Higher order and other more pressing business priorities abound, focused as they are on the primary task of survival and business development. Australian business is said to have a largely short-term focus (BCA, 2004), and issues overlap and conflict. The scenario is further complicated by the role intricacies of employers, government, society and individuals which are interlocking and mutually reinforcing. Resolution requires co-operation across policy-making functions where a variety of self-interests become involved, including inter-generational competition and the policy difficulties of making generalisations about individuals within age cohorts. These interdependencies and intricacies are encapsulated in Table 1.1.
Table 1.1: Matrix of contributors to a selection of business, work and ageing problems and solutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Labour source or supply</th>
<th>Job design and working hours</th>
<th>Employee benefits</th>
<th>Skills development</th>
<th>Sustainable fitness for work</th>
<th>Retirement income &amp; financial planning</th>
<th>Human resource management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enterprise</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author.

The following are a few examples of the contradictions that derive from businesses undertaking projects under differing market place conditions.

1.3.2 Contradictions

The *Australian Financial Review*, in apparently unrelated articles on 16 November 2004, provided insight into contradictions in practice, and represents a sample of the breadth of the views of the community when it comes to the employment of older workers together with the complexity of workforce planning and management.

Under the heading, ‘ATO in Push for IT Staff’ (p. 35), the newspaper reported that a $350 million technology project had been delayed – ‘(it) would take a year longer than expected because a skills shortage made it impossible to meet its original three-year plan that would require 800 staff’. On the preceding page a similarly large computer-dependent business was retrenching similarly skilled staff, ‘NAB to Axe 300 IT Jobs in Revamp’.

Page 67 reported a survey into attitudes of people earning more than $60,000. The survey found that ‘only 28% thought their employer genuinely had employees’ interests at heart and 46% feel little or no attachment to the company’. More than half felt ‘outright cynicism’ towards the lip service paid to organisational values. There was an overwhelming sense that managers did not ‘walk the talk’.
A further article (p. 67) dealt with needs of new mothers and institutional constraints that are encountered by small business wishing to re-engage skilled staff returning to work after giving birth. Difficulties reported included those for parents in locating suitable child care facilities and, if successful, in paying for them; if the woman can find a place ‘the costs are a major concern, even for those on decent salaries’. There are differences in the Fringe Benefits Tax treatments for child care. Unlike big business, small business employees are not eligible for the Fringe Benefits Tax exemption. This situation was said to be resulting in working mothers joining or starting up a small business because ‘large organisations tend to have inflexible work structures’.

Other complexities and assertions included in this newspaper article embrace the legal requirement on employers to provide maternity leave, which is reported to be ‘vastly more difficult for small business than big business’, an assertion that governments are failing to make structural changes that include improved access to child care ‘to accommodate women at a time when more are returning to work after childbirth than ever’; and a claim that ‘the 30% rebate promised by the federal government during the election does not effectively address the underlying problems of a lack of cost-effective care or boosting women’s participation in the workforce’. The article journalist also reported that ‘almost a quarter of the respondents to a Taskforce on Care Costs survey “Creating Choice: Employment and the Cost of Caring” have reduced working hours because of the high cost of child care’.

In the newspaper’s editorial on page 70, Prime Minister Howard was reported as intending to encourage a spirit of enterprise in Australia during his fourth term. ‘A robust culture of self reliance to cope with the costs of baby boomer retirements; encouraging individuals to take responsibility for their own employment is one way we can do this.’ A contradictory, retirement-oriented thread emphasising holidays rather than employment appeared in the Business Travel Quarterly, 18 November 2004, p. 4. Gulf Air was offering a significant discount on business-class travel on some international flights from Sydney for people over fifty-five years old. Thus in the one edition of a newspaper, the reader is confronted with an apparent worker shortage, and an oversupply in the one occupational group; a lack of trust in management by workers, and difficulties encountered by business in providing family-friendly work arrangements; an assertion that individuals must be responsible for their employment,
and encouragement of older workers to take a holiday. It is difficult to get a clear view of the optimum intervention(s).

Personal, business and government complexities are compounded by negative attitudes towards ageing workers. These attitudes present as age-based discrimination and stereotyping at work, which is reported by the Equal Opportunity Commissioners of Victoria, Western Australia and South Australia to be widespread across employment (Brooke, 2001). The impact of discrimination and related stereotyping was illustrated by a 1999 human resource survey, conducted by human resources consultancy firm Drake International, which asked 500 employers what they considered to be the ideal age for new management recruits – 62% said thirty-one to forty years of age, 23% said in their forties whilst 0% said in their fifties.

Despite the pervasive, negative views held about older workers, the Australian Government has, in recent times, legislated to provide incentives for an extended working life by raising the superannuation preservation age to age sixty. That is, the age at, which an individual can access superannuation contributions. Preservation ages are shown in the following table.

Table 1.2: Superannuation: preservation age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Birth</th>
<th>Age at 2002</th>
<th>Preservation Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before 1 July 1960</td>
<td>Older than 42</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1960- June 1961</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1961- June 1962</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1962- June 1963</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1963- June 1964</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After June 1964</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouses who have never been employed in the paid workforce</td>
<td>65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australia Post Superannuation Scheme: Product Disclosure Statement (2005), p. 9. (Modified by the addition of the middle column)

In its 2006 Budget, the Federal Government reinforced its age sixty retirement objective through taxation incentives providing favourable treatment to lump sum payments on retirement and to most pension payments received after age sixty.
The stereotyping and discrimination by employers against older workers appears to contradict scientific and medical evidence that there is no strong link between ageing and productivity. The Report ‘Population and Ageing and the Economy’ (Access Economics, 2001, p. 5) cites work by Reid (1989), McNaught and Henderson (1990), Encel (1992), Salthouse (1994) and Waldman and Avolio (1986) as indicating that productivity declines little with age and that, in particular types of work, especially those requiring cerebral skill, may actually improve with age. Access Economics, (2001, pp.5 and 6) quote Birren (in Levic, 1988) as concluding that age is not a good predictor of verbal intelligence, ability to learn, competence or effectiveness at work.

Ilmarinen of the Department of Physiology, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health has collected further evidence that ageing may not adversely affect performance at work. He has developed a Work Ability Index which has apparent widespread acceptance throughout Europe. It has been tested by clinical examinations and received follow-up over eleven years (Costa, Goedhard and Ilmarinen, 2005). A scatter diagram presented by Ilmarinen during a Melbourne presentation (VECCI, 27 April 2004) appears below as Figure 1.6. The patterns appear correct at an intuitive level, in that experience suggests that the work performance of some people does deteriorate with age; others appear unaffected by age, providing evidence against the efficacy of broad age-based stereotyping.

Figure 1.6: Work ability index

Source: Ilmarinen 2004, power point slide.

It has been noted by this researcher that many researchers including Hirsh, MacPherson and Hardy (2000), Morris and Verkatesh (2000), Arrowsmith and McGoldrick (1997) and Yeatts, Folts and Knapp (2000) have called for more study of ageing and work,
claiming that little attention has been paid to the employment opportunities of older workers and how these opportunities relate to job content, that there has been limited research on technology adoption by older workers, and that insufficient is known about older worker acceptance of organisational change and about their decisions related to remaining in the workforce or leaving it.

1.3.3 Skills currency and older workers

To confound the problem of discriminatory behaviour towards older workers, statistics reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (Figure 1.7) show that older workers might well possess obsolete skills. Formal education virtually ceases for most people before the age of thirty.

Figure 1.7: Participation in formal education by age and gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-24</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-69</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ABS (2005) Education and Training Experience, ABS CAT NO: 6278.0

Similar trends are evident from the ABS (2005) Education and Training Experience shown in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3: Participation in formal education by age and gender, 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Percentage participating in formal education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-24</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-69</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005): CAT No 6278.0
Excessive job tenure is also likely to be related to skills currency. ABS statistics indicate that job tenure increases as people age. This situation is illustrated in Figure 1.8.

**Figure 1.8:** Duration of current jobs according to age group

![Duration of current job by person in each age group](image)

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (1998), CAT No 6209

The following time series demonstrates that, at the macro level, job tenure patterns have been consistent over time.

**Table 1.4:** Duration of current job

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 1 year</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 years</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 years</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 years</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10 years</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20 years</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 plus years</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2004), CAT No 6209

Note 1 February 2006 statistics withdrawn by ABS because of error.

Note 2 Figures vary by gender and industry group — highest turnover in accommodation, cafes and restaurants; lowest in agriculture, forestry, fishing, electricity, gas and water supply.

These are matters to be addressed in this study.
1.3.4 Risks in changing custom and practice: a case study

The preceding discussion suggests many unknowns and contradictions with regard to the employment of older workers. A French experience demonstrates the risks to a government and to reputations when changes to long-established practices in relation to working hours and the length of working lives are attempted. The story attests to the complex interplays by groups and individuals when attempts are made to change the status quo around an individual’s retirement aspirations to align with government desires to encourage longer work lives. The competing passions associated with the French experience are summarised in the following description of events.

The Business Section of the *International Herald Tribune* (20 October 2004) carried a story ‘France Headed for Stagnation, Report Warns’. It dealt with a 200-page report prepared for the French Finance Minister by Michael Camdessus, the former head of the International Monetary Fund. The Camdessus Report concluded that France needed to undertake radical reform of its work practices or face ‘irreversible economic stagnation’. Camdessus said that the key to faster expansion was ‘allowing people to work harder’.

Camdessus said that France’s thirty-five-hour week and high minimum wages, combined with the effects of an ageing population, would trim the economy’s growth potential from an annual 2.5% to 1.75% over the next decade. The Finance Minister indicated support for the report, declaring it ‘my favourite new reading’. Members of the opposition Socialist Party, on the other hand, accused the Finance Minister of using the report as a distraction on the day that a controversial debate on the 2005 Budget began in Parliament.

The *International Herald Tribune* (October 2004, p.14) reported that there was little disagreement among economists; some ‘feared that recommendations would be ignored as others had in the past’. ‘We’ve had reports like that for 20 years, and for 20 years they’ve been put in the drawer’ (Marc Touati, Chief Economist, Natexiis Banque Populaire in Paris). Views of other business journalists in Washington, New York and London ranged from supportive – ‘the report rightly paints a dire picture of a French economy in crisis’ (Alister Heath, Knight Ridder, *Tribune Business News*, Washington, 24 October, 2004) – to strong personal attacks (Julio Godoy, *Global Information*...
Network, New York, 22 October, 2004). Godoy describes Camdessus as ‘the inept surgeon’ of the world economy who ‘brought much poverty and unemployment to countries as varied as Argentina, Russia, Mexico and Senegal. Gerard Dupuy, opinion writer with the Liberation News Daily, said that the ‘Financial crisis in south-east Asia in 1997, [which] repeated monetary storms in Mexico, Argentina, Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America, and endemic poverty in Africa’ could be attributed in all cases to IMF Director Camdessus who ‘dreamt of being the healing architect of the world economy. But he was at best a fireman, at worst a pyromaniac.’

Attempt at major change in the area of retirement is not for the faint hearted.

1.4 Research problem

1.4.1 Overview

The research problem is:

*The boundaryless career: is there a disparity between theory, practice and worker desire in relation to older workers?*

The researcher argues in this thesis that communications technology and an abundance of available capital for investment are enabling, and driving, new ways of undertaking global business. This change in business practices is creating demands for employees to look for less traditional and less structured careers, even though these new ‘boundaryless careers’ may not be attractive to the majority of the current cohort of older workers.

Nevertheless, the divergence between emerging organisational needs and the traditional career expectations of workers has significant consequences for both organisations and labour supply. One potential consequence would appear to be that government financial incentives to encourage older workers with redundant skills to remain at work longer may not, of themselves, be sufficient to encourage high performance from its workforce.
1.4.2 The evolution of the research question

The research question evolved over time and through a funnelling of questions that emerged from the issues contained in the preceding discussion. The researcher consciously delayed framing the research question as he sought to understand the issues before developing solutions. He was mindful and respectful of the long-standing, national and international patterns of behaviour towards older workers, and considered that much of this behaviour could be stimulated by means that could easily be misunderstood by a researcher. The researcher wished to use the research question as a vehicle for unravelling the complexities surrounding older workers and extended working lives. The information analysis followed a similar pattern, in that conclusions were delayed for as long as possible to enable extensive reflection. The researcher’s intention was to use the insights gathered, as the study progressed, to contribute to theories, with content that would not be easily discounted.

Early questions for research included:
• What are the range of considerations and concerns about population ageing and work?
• What are the most important issues?
• Why would older workers want to continue working after reaching superannuation-inspired retirement age?
• What constrains older workers in terms of their work motivation?
• What would motivate older workers to continue working?
  And finally
• Can older workers add value in today’s world of work?

As the researcher conducted fieldwork, reviewed the literature and monitored the progress of developments through media reports, a list of potential areas to explore were identified. They are listed in Table 1.5
A lack of a medical or related discipline expertise prevented the researcher from studying the impacts of physical and mental deterioration as people age, and issues surrounding occupational health and safety of older workers at work. Accordingly, these were not included as areas of investigation.

In considering potential areas for research focus, it seemed that individuals were clearly impacted in different ways. This suggested that a one-size-fits-all solution might lead to unintended consequences. A further intrigue was the compounding impact of organisational entities and interdependencies that would need to co-operate to resolve many aspects of business, work and ageing. Examples of these interdependencies are shown in Table 1.1.

The study of career plateaus emerged as a non-threatening way of talking with case study participants about the interdependencies and intricacies that impact them at work, and in their private lives. Career plateau could be seen as a broad signifier or descriptor.
of a collection of other problems and seemed to offer the researcher the opportunity to be highly focused whilst simultaneously allowing a holistic approach to understanding the problem. The objective became to understand older worker readiness for twenty-first-century work by seeking to understand their circumstances through an in-depth study of their career plateaus, as they described them. Open-ended questions were used to achieve this. This knowledge was then related to the emerging literature about the ‘boundaryless career’.

The ‘boundaryless career’ appealed because it seemed to relate to globalisation, and the internet, which is breaking down many of the boundaries that have traditionally constrained business. A further important consideration was that some careers researchers were claiming the ‘boundaryless career’ to be the predominant form of new career. These thoughts were encapsulated in the research question with the objecting of unravelling a very complex problem concerning whether or not older workers are able, and willing, to make a high-performance contribution to organisations at the start of the twenty-first-century.

1.5 Methodology

The theoretical framework is multi-disciplinary, drawing from economic, social, management, business, production and operations management together with human resources, particularly organisational psychology theory.

It is a qualitative study. The principal methodology involves forty case studies and pattern matching. Considerable triangulation has been undertaken for quality control. Worker expectations, plans and work experiences were analysed through a study of ‘career plateaus’, which was a term frequently used by workers to describe their work situation. The work experiences of the case study participants were compared to relevant literature, and Australia Post as an organisation was compared against the emergent characteristics of twenty-first-century global business. The problem-solving logic and structure of the thesis is summarised in Figure 1.9.
The darker lines demonstrate the power of the organisation over individual workers, and also tie the host organisation, Australia Post, to the global business environment in which it operates. Similarly, the diagram shows the research relationship between the global literature on the careers and the workplace expectations of older workers on the one hand, and the fieldwork undertaken at Australia Post on the other.

The general context literature review investigates the nature of work and organisations at the start of the twenty-first century and this is compared against the readiness of older workers for twenty-first-century work. This was achieved through a review of the career plateau literature. The comparison proceeds in later chapters via a study of the parent theories of careers, motivation and job design. As the careers literature was pointing to the ‘boundaryless career’ as the future career, the ‘boundaryless career’ became the focus theory and the basis of a comparison between forty case studies and the theory surrounding careers and the twenty-first-century organisation. The structure of the literature review is shown in Figure 1.10
1.6 Limitations of scope

The case studies were limited to a single organisation, Australia Post, and to the national headquarters of that organisation in Melbourne. However, the fieldwork was more comprehensive than is normally possible, because the researcher had a career with the organisation that spanned almost forty years. The researcher occupied a senior position for most of this time, and his career was dedicated to organisation development.

The relationship between anxiety, older workers and the boundaryless career has been largely excluded from this thesis. This significant issue was excluded on the basis that the researcher does not possess sufficient psychological expertise to make a worthwhile contribution to theory, and moreover, the subject matter represents a thesis in its own right.

1.7 Value of the research

This research should contribute to knowledge about the career experiences of older workers, and their work and life aspirations. The linking of this understanding to the emergent needs of twenty-first-century organisations offers the potential to contribute to productivity and organisational effectiveness, to the reduction of wasted human capital as people age, and to career theory.
1.8 Conclusion

The global challenges to governments and business of declining birth rates and population ageing have been well documented and communicated. Discussion on the wide-ranging impacts appear in the press on most days. The predicted impacts include a decline in Australia’s GDP, reduced productivity and increased health care. There are discussions about taxation, superannuation, participation in work, work preferences, industrial design, child care, discrimination, skills, labour supply and shortages, the cost of older labour, the needs of younger workers, and more.

The problems of extending the productive capacity and working lives of older workers are complex and multi-dimensional. They involve a complicated web of conflicting and contradictory forces that are often driven by short-term business needs, the life course events of individuals, and political behaviour. The following chapter explains the methodology chosen by the researcher to unravel and understand the issues.
2.1 Structure of thesis

This chapter outlines the problem-solving methodology and structure of the thesis to which Figure 1.1, Chapter 1 refers.

The reasons for the Australian Government attaching importance to the retention of older workers as productive contributors to Australia’s GDP is outlined in Chapter 1. Chapter 1 argues that retaining older workers in a productive capacity is a vexed matter, and that interdependencies seem to be numerous, varied and connected in multiple ways. Thus it was not altogether clear what the key issues affecting retention of older workers were and what the response interventions should be.

Features of this landscape included embedded and largely negative attitudes held about older workers by society, by employers and by individual workers themselves. Those deeply held attitudes appeared to undermine the satisfaction of Australia’s longer-term labour supply interests. Chapter 1 puts forward the proposition that the study of the career plateauing experiences of older workers offers the potential to unravel, and therefore understand, the issues surrounding work and the older worker. The ‘boundaryless career’ is introduced as a descriptor, used by some academics, to describe the new careers emanating from the globalisation of business. This combination presents the opportunity of comparing the readiness of older workers for the work of the twenty-first-century organisation.
Chapter 2 outlines the reasons for selecting the case study and its complementary pattern matching methodology for researching the potential disparity between emerging employment practice, traditional and contemporary workplace theory, and the national interest of retaining older workers in productive work. A primary focus of the methodology is to understand whether or not the ‘boundaryless career’ is likely to be attractive to older workers and whether older workers can satisfy the demands of the twenty-first-century organisation as embodied in the ‘boundaryless career’. The quality control aspects of the research and the relevance of the background of the researcher are also included in this chapter.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 contain the literature review. In summary, those chapters provide background theory about the nature of business at the start of the twenty-first-century and the experience of older workers at the start of the twenty-first-century; as seen through the lens of the career plateau literature. This enables a comparison of business needs with older worker readiness to satisfy those needs. The career plateau literature led to the literature dealing with the psychological aspects of motivation for and at work, and the related discipline of job design. The focus literature dealt with the ‘boundaryless career’. The ‘boundaryless career’ was chosen as it was reported by some scholars to be the predominant form of new career and the construct seemed to align with the increasing reduction of formal business structures which is a feature of the global organisation.

Chapter 6 details the fieldwork for this thesis whilst Chapters 7 and 8 compare the literature against practice, and provide the contribution of this research to theory and practice.

2.2 Choice of methodology

2.2.1 No precedents

fix’, frequently followed by ‘unintended consequences’. Drucker and Senge point to the need for caution in researching the business impacts of population ageing.

2.2.2 Complexity and counter-intuitive behaviour

There is little doubt that societal unfamiliarity with the business impacts of population ageing goes some way to explaining the appearance that business practice and the behaviour of older workers seem, on the surface, to be very much at odds with personal business needs and national interest. Gharajedaghi (2006, p. 49) explains this phenomenon in terms of social dynamics which, he concludes, are ‘fraught with counterintuitive behaviour’ on foundations that produce ‘complexity beyond the reach of the analytical approach’.

Counterbalancing the many attempts to change the status quo is an equally determined potential resistance to change by vested interests. The consequences of the French Finance Minister’s attempt to change long-established work hours practices in France, as reported in Chapter 1, illustrates this point. This example demonstrates that the required responses by countries, businesses and individuals to problems and opportunities associated with the demographic changes discussed in Chapter 1 are confusing, very complex and potentially damaging to personal reputations. Who would blame an enterprise from determining that until there is greater clarity, or an immediate problem that can be understood and dimensioned, the demographic change issue represents a major distraction from the primary tasks associated with remaining in business? Such considerations led the researcher to conclude that answers to the labour supply needs of global businesses and individual career plateaus are not obvious and that a holistic, systems approach to problem-solving would be necessary to properly understand the issues.

The web of complexities surrounding business, work and ageing also reinforced the researcher’s determination to avoid the trap of insufficiently informed data collection with consequential interventions resulting from a failure to adequately understand those complexities and how they interrelate. It was not clear what questions lay at the core of the problem of having an enthusiastic and competent supply of older workers contributing productively. It was not clear what data may or may not be relevant, nor
what should be collected and analysed. The apparent causal links involved real life experiences, which were too complex for survey or experimental methods of problem-solving to illuminate (Yin, 1994, p. 15). The problems surrounding older workers looked like ‘a mess’, which Gharajedaghi (2006, p. 131) describes as a system of problems where the elements of the mess are ‘highly interrelated’. Further support for a systems approach to the research problem came from Senge (1994), with his definition of systems thinking, arguing that at its broadest level it embraces ‘a large and fairly amorphous body of methods, tools and principles, all oriented to looking at the interrelatedness of forces, and seeing them as part of a common process’.

These scenarios with their apparent logical inconsistencies therefore led the researcher to be wary of arriving at answers based on pure logic or closed questions. Accordingly, the above considerations ruled out quantitative approaches to data collection as the primary data source. Case study and pattern matching seemed to be the methodologies of best fit for the research problem as the researcher reflected on the McNamara Fallacy, and later gained assurance from Gharajedaghi’s logic that the complexity of the problem ruled out a purely analytical approach to problem-solving.

_The McNamara Fallacy: The first step is to measure whatever can be easily measured. This is OK as far as it goes. The second step is to disregard that which can’t be easily measured or to give it an arbitrary quantitative value. This is artificial and misleading. The third step is to presume that what can’t be measured easily really isn’t important. This is blindness. The fourth step is to say what can’t be easily measured really doesn’t exist. This is suicide._

*(Charles Handy, The Empty Raincoat, p. 219)*

### 2.3 Case Study and Pattern Matching

As argued above, case study methodology is at the heart of this thesis because the research problem and its causes and real-life interventions are unsuited to survey or experimental strategies (Yin, 1994, p. 15). Yin (p. 15) points out that case studies allow an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events, such as individual life cycles.
Pattern matching is reported by Yin (p. 106), to be one of the most desirable strategies for analysing case study data, although as currently developed, it is not precise and may not readily lend itself to quantitative or statistical validity (Yin, p. 110). Nevertheless, pattern matching does offer a logical and sensible approach for analysing information collected from open-ended questions about people’s lives at work, as well as from the personal charts of their work-life experiences that the case study participants were asked to bring to the interview. Pattern matching extended to the way the researcher undertook the literature review; focusing on the identification of similarities and points of difference. A diverse body of Australian and international literature was analysed for insight and patterns.

Pattern matching is a normal problem-solving method followed by business managers and leaders, and it is usual for solutions to become more focused and refined as the information supplied by data becomes clearer. This gradual clarification of patterns occurred in this research, which sought eventually to arrive at conclusions based on ‘gross matches or mismatches’ (Yin, 1994, p. 110). This conscious delay in forming conclusions added an additional level of quality control and recognised warnings by Yin (p. 110) that the case study research methodology currently lacks precision tools.

Pattern matching also caters for the reality that individual circumstances vary and that the variance may be significant. Life experiences embrace good and bad times and associated feelings and perceptions, all of which are highly personal and subjective and therefore not easily fully and accurately understood by an observer. Further, this type of experiential data is not easily given a weighting to enable a more scientific comparison with other aggregate data or data from another person’s life. This is particularly true when the data do not stand alone, but rather are linked to many other pieces of individual specific information, and where the data appear to be linked by both dependent and independent variables.

The researcher therefore considered that case studies and pattern matching offered an optimum way of obtaining findings about work experiences within the context of business, work and ageing. Pattern matching seemed to offer the potential for findings to apply generally across organisations.
2.4 Case study questions

Forty people volunteered to be interviewed and interviews were of one-hour duration. The interviews occurred in the researcher’s office. The discussion was transcribed in longhand. In addition, participants were asked to bring a chart of their work-life experiences, its ups and downs, to the interview. Examples of these work-life charts are included in Appendix 1.

The questions were in a structured sequence, as listed below. The questions were directed at providing insight into potential workplace disincentives for an extended working life. Questions were informed by the theoretical proposition (Yin, p. 103) that ‘a boundaryless career will not encourage workforce participation by older workers’. This proposition and the questions used in the study were framed against a substantial body of research that has supported the motivational theories and research of Hackman and Oldham (1976); Maslow, as reported in Adair (1990), amongst many others. The questions were also informed by earlier studies into the business impacts of workforce ageing which were initiated and managed by the researcher (see Section 2.9).

In summary, the interviews explored questions directed at better understanding why older workers might wish to continue working when they could retire, to appreciate whether high performance and discretionary effort could be encouraged amongst, and harvested from, older workers. The questions also sought to validate older worker relevance to predicted twenty-first-century organisational needs, and sought to gain insight into intergenerational differences as they might relate to the workplace. The interview questions were:

1. What was your motivation for volunteering to be part of the study?
2. How old are you?
3. Gender.
4. What is your job classification?
5. How many years have you worked in your current position?
6. How many years have you worked at the organisation?
7. What is your ideal retirement age?
8. Have you undertaken retirement planning?
9. What would be your reason for retirement?
10. Tell me about your job mobility.
11. Describe your career progression.
12. How do you develop and maintain your skills?
13. How do you learn best?
14. What are your hobbies and other external interests?
15. What are the desirable job features for you?
16. Do you have career regrets?
17. What is your perception of your value to the employer and what resources would be lost to the organisation if you left the organisation?
18. What is your perception of the skills of older workers?
19. What is your perception of the skills of younger workers?
20. Do you have comments on the workplace environment?

In combination, these questions seemed to enable the collection of age, gender and job classification specific data on what is important to older workers at work, and how well their needs are satisfied. The data collected from the questions was thought likely to enable an informed opinion to be developed on how these older workers feel about their future career and retirement prospects, and why they feel that way? Questions related to older worker aspirations seemed to be important to forming a view on the strength of alignment between these older worker goals and those of the twenty-first-century organisation.

2.5 Case study data analysis

‘Career plateau’ was a term frequently used by participants to describe their work circumstances. The term emerged as a broad and non-threatening focus for communication about the experience of work, and provided a high-level framework for discussions that allowed considerable scope for participants to use their own words to describe an array of complex problems and issues that they thought surrounded their circumstances. In this way, the researcher achieved a level of detachment from the central research problem, which focused on whether older workers add value to modern organisations. At the same time, the researcher was provided with a means of gaining insight and amplification of the relevant issues relating to the problem. Importantly,
this approach also allowed the researcher to delay forming conclusions until he had heard the participants describe their own particular circumstances, had undertaken deep reflection on what they were saying during the interview and through their work-life chart, and had read and reflected on the literature and contemporary practice surrounding the employment of older workers as it unfolded and was reported in the business press. An outcome of this approach was that discovery continued throughout the time taken to complete this thesis.

Data analysis of the case studies was undertaken in three stages of refinement using Strauss and Corbin (1990) methodology as reported in Hussey and Hussey (1997, pp. 266-269).

Open coding: This involved analysing the transcripts under broad headings and extracting and tabulating raw data as individual elements.

Axial coding: This involved connecting the data to three central categories, which in themselves are related – job design, management and supervision and personal interests.

Selective coding: This involved selecting the core category – personal interest – and systematically relating it to the other categories and generating the major themes.

Data were displayed in a variety of ways to assist analysis. The displays assisted interpretation of frequencies, complexities of dependencies and interdependencies.

2.6 Triangulation

Given that the case studies needed to rely on a wide variety of sources of evidence (Yin, 1994, p. 91), multiple sources of evidence have informed this research. These sources were considered and analysed simultaneously, with the intention of identifying patterns as a means of understanding the issues, the dependencies and interdependencies.
With respect to the case studies, which became the foundation for this thesis, quality control over interpretations was achieved through a wide variety of mechanisms including the comparison of the interview participants’ life charts with their interview conversations. In addition, many of the participant work situations were known to the researcher, and often to quite a deep level. This enabled a deeper reflection than would otherwise have been possible (Yin, p. 86). Participant observation was a feature of the research, and is an approach described by Hussey and Hussey (1997, p. 68) as ‘a very rewarding methodology’. The researcher worked in the same organisation as the participants and had experienced similar issues to those being discussed at the data-gathering interviews.

2.7 The researcher: a participant observer

The researcher first became a participant observer in the field of population ageing, business and work when invited to join the Australian Employers Convention in 1999 as a Steering Committee member. This initiative was sponsored by the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business. The Steering Group consisted of people drawn from business, government and university.

In 2001, the Convention became a joint venture with Swinburne University and developed an international reputation as a research institute and provider of policy advice to governments and business, on business, work and ageing. The researcher was Deputy Chairman of this joint venture.

The researcher was initially struck by the nexus between the looming labour supply shortfall predictions of Access Economics (2001), and the entrenched workplace discrimination against older workers anecdotally reported in the press as well as through research funded by the Victorian, South Australian and Western Australian State Equal Opportunity Commissioners (Brooke, 2001). At the same time, the Australian Government, principally through the Minister for Ageing, was publishing academic and scientific rebuttals to popular stereotyping that ageing necessarily led to lesser productivity and reduced effectiveness at work. The researcher concluded from this that the current custom and practice of the community with regard to work and ageing was worthy of review.
At around this time, the researcher felt that his own career might be drawing to a close, despite his taking considerable effort to maintain skills currency. His employer sought to prepare for a foreseen shortage of general managers, following the retirement of the baby boomers, by fast-tracking replacements. In the view of the researcher, the organisation’s method for achieving this was unsafe. Selection decisions for fast-tracking or omission from succession planning initiatives were subject to artificial quotas for each organisational unit, and did not compensate for the different numerical staffing levels of different organisational groups. Further, the researcher wondered about the wisdom of excluding technical experts from the succession planning process.

This background of high-level personal interest and the ability for direct observation offered opportunities for enhanced insight, which were enabled by the reputation of the researcher. He was well known and respected within the organisation and participants seemed to be unafraid to reveal matters that might otherwise have been left unsaid (Hussey & Hussey, 1997, p. 69). Nevertheless the researchers familiarity with the issues, and his knowledge of most of the participants, highlighted the need for caution and suggested multiple studies directed at acquiring many sources of evidence in the service of an unbiased unraveling of the problems of population ageing, work and business.

The researcher was in a privileged position in that he had worked within Australia Post for thirty-four years, principally leading enterprise-wide organisation development and change projects. The researcher reported to the Chief Executive Officer of Australia Post for approximately ten years on these assignments. This meant that the researcher was intimately of the circumstances of the organisation and how these might have impacted the case study participants. This provided new dimensions and richness to data interpretation. The researcher has a deep respect for the organisation and its people and has observed that a successful organisation is encouraged, by a supportive public, to innovate and to strive for excellence. His background is in industrial engineering, operations management, organisation development and change. He has been committed to socio-technical systems principles throughout his career, and has dedicated his efforts in job design to increasing the decision content in all jobs, at every organisational level.
The researcher was supported in Australia Post by the Chief Executive Officer and the Group Manager Human Resources, who encouraged in-house research to be communicated, by the researcher, through the business media in Australia. This allowed the organisation to contribute practical insight freely to anyone or any organisation with an interest in using it to inform their own thinking, policy or practice.

With this in mind, the researcher gave many presentations across Australia, both within Australia Post and to other informed bodies. These presentations invited comment, rebuttal or new insight from a wide range of perspectives from within the organisations and more generally throughout Australian business. Contribution to debate and clarification included input to a Prime Minister’s Community Business Partnership study. (a report was prepared for the Prime Minister); and the Business Council of Australia’s business guide for supporting older workers, *50+ Age Can Work* (2003). Presentations were made at conferences, including ‘Business, Work and Ageing: Valuing Diversity Forum’ – Queensland Government and Commerce Queensland (Brisbane, 2004); ACIRRT Conference (Sydney, 2004); Ballarat a Learning City and Central Highlands Area Consultative Committee Inc. (Ballarat, 2003); ‘The Flexible Workforce Symposium’ – Recruitment and Consulting Services Association Ltd (Sydney, 2003); ‘Working on Managing Age’- Australian Human Resources Institute; City of Melbourne, Hudson, Dept of Employment and Workplace Relations (Melbourne, 2003)- ‘EEO Seminar – Workplace Flexibility – the Hot Issues’ – Australian Industry Group (Melbourne, 2003); ‘An Ageless Workforce Symposium’ – the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and National Seniors Association (Sydney, 2003); ‘Addressing the Issue of an Ageing Workforce’ – Australian Industry Group (2003).

Media interviews between 2002 and 2005 included those with the *Lateline* television program; *Australian Financial Review*; *Business Review Weekly*; *Human Resources*; *The Age* (Melbourne); *The Australian*; *Sydney Morning Herald*; *West Australian*; *Journal of the Australian Institute of Human Resources*. All of these media are shapers of policy discussion and debate.

Further triangulation occurred through the monitoring of newspaper clippings and feature articles in the business print media. The principal source of media comment reviewed on an ongoing basis over the six-year period of the research for this thesis was
This newspaper is produced six days per week and has an extensive readership of business decision-makers. The tracking of contemporary practice through *Australian Financial Review* became important as shortages of skilled labour began to impact and inspire business responses that were occurring faster than scholarly research and associated journal articles could be produced.

### 2.8 Construct validity

The triangulation described above enabled a tracking of community attitudes and progress and in so doing provided a cross-check for this research and a measure of external validity in terms of the generalisation of findings (Yin, 1994, p. 35).

The literature review of the fields of career plateaus, and motivation at work, enable a consistency check against the work of other scholars and thus a control over reliability of broad interpretations and issues under consideration. It also enabled a constant check on construct validity.

As a further source of understanding and quality control, the researcher commissioned secondary research within the organisation to provide associated insight into ageing and work, which helped his understanding and facilitated a gradual narrowing of focus, whilst contributing to the internal validity of the study. These studies are described below.

### 2.9 Three supporting studies

#### 2.9.1 Overview

The background outlined above led to the researcher commissioning and managing two supplementary studies at Australia Post, his workplace at the time and the organisational source of the data for this thesis. A third study was designed and executed by the organisation after the researcher had left his employment at Australia Post. These supporting studies provided outcomes that, in part, informed the design of the case studies and the reporting of research outcomes.
2.9.2 Information Technology Division

The first study was conducted by researchers Rolland and Brooke through an entity known as the Australian Partnership for Business, Work and Ageing. The study was funded by an Australian Research Council Grant that was directed at drawing on the experience of known and respected Australian companies to identify opportunities to more effectively manage an ageing workforce and to develop a range of best practice strategies that might benefit employees and employers.

This study involved interviews with forty-seven volunteers, aged over forty years, from Australia Post’s Information Technology Division. Approximately six hundred people worked in the Information Technology Division at the time and so those interviewed represented about 8% of that division’s workforce. This division was chosen as it was considered to be at the leading edge of technology adoption and development, and it was thought that trends might emerge first in such a workplace. The study focused on age balance, career progression and plateaus, opportunities for development and promotion, and retirement plans. The outcomes were reported to the Human Resources Committee of Australia Post’s Board (McCarthy, 2001).

2.9.3 Shared Services Division

During 2004, a study of forty of the organisation’s youngest Shared Services employees was conducted with the assistance of IBM. At Australia Post Headquarters, most young people are employed in the Shared Services Division. The division operates as a call centre, dealing with both internal and external accounting transactions and with all operational, personnel transactions such as leave, pay and the like. At the time of the Shared Services study there were approximately 350 staff employed and thus the study covered about 11% of employees.

The Shared Services study was commissioned to consider intergenerational issues, their similarities and differences. It analysed the career expectations, experiences and future aspirations of the younger workers and provided insight into younger worker expectations of the contribution that older employees could make to their career development. Further, the study sought to gather some insight into whether younger
worker attributes and experiences were in alignment with emergent global business trends.

The study used the Cynefin ‘sensemaking’ framework, which incorporates story-telling or narrative techniques to assist in the understanding of complexity. Group discussions were taped, then transcribed and analysed for themes. The outcomes from this study were also reported to the Human Resources Committee of Australia Post’s Board (McCarthy, 2004).

The research question focused on the boundaryless career and career plateauing among older workers, and what that might mean for businesses starved of a traditional supply of younger workers. The research question emerged following considerable reflection on all of the sources of data referred to in this chapter. Another important directional lead came from the Australian Government’s objective of encouraging mature-aged workers to extend their working lives. The study of career plateaus appeared very relevant to these issues, as well as seemingly providing an avenue for exploring issues surrounding older workers and their early retirement patterns, in a way that would provide a worthwhile contribution to theory and practice.

2.9.4 Retirement intentions
A third study using surveys was developed and actioned by Australia Post after this researcher had ended his employment there. It involved survey responses by 8,525 Australia Post employees concerning their retirement intentions. A further 1,750 Australia Post recent retirees provided survey responses about the factors that led them to retire, what they had done during retirement, what they would have done differently in hindsight, and whether their retirement expectations were different to their experiences. The broad outcomes of this research are included in Chapter 7, and have also been reported by the Group Manager Corporate Human Resources (McDonald, 2006).
2.10 Conclusion

No other study as comprehensive and as deep as this research, and also focusing on the careers and aspirations of older workers, has been identified as having occurred in Australia, or indeed elsewhere. Given that some scholars, such as Dany, Mallon and Arthur (2003) and Cappelli (1999), observe a lack of empirical data about ‘boundaryless careers’ and the end of the one company career, and others, including Hirsch et al. (2000), report that in the economics literature, ‘scant attention has been given to employment opportunities and job content available to older workers’, it is reasonable to conclude that this study can contribute to the theory and practice surrounding the careers, and specifically ‘boundaryless careers’, in relation to older workers. In support of this statement, the researcher offers the following propositions.

The size of the primary case study and its two supporting studies managed by this researcher totalled 132 people. This is larger and more diverse than the case studies supporting Levinson’s seminal research on careers. The data were analysed by a researcher who had been embedded within the organisation for almost forty years and had specialised for most of this time in the field of work design and organisation development, which also suggests potential for a level of uniqueness to the contribution to knowledge. It is unlikely that any other researcher has considered the interdependencies in the same way as has occurred with this research.

In combination, these facts lead the researcher to conclude that, in all likelihood, this body of work makes a distinct contribution to the body of knowledge about the careers and career aspirations and abilities of older workers.

Chapter 2 has explained the methodology for collecting and analysing field research data. Chapter 3 is the first of the literature review chapters, which will be compared against the field research in later chapters.
3

Literature Review: Twenty-first-century Business and Career Plateaus

3.1 Overview

Chapter 2 argued that an analysis of case studies using pattern matching provided a sound method for understanding the complexity of business, work and ageing as those complexities were felt by older workers. The next three chapters provide the literature review for the thesis. These chapters seek to illuminate the tension between the labour requirements produced by non-linear and sometimes chaotic factors associated with the emerging global organisation and business, and the more linear expectations of older workers as those workers endeavour to match their personal requirements to those of the organisation.

Chapter 3 contains the context literature. It describes a vibrant, ground-breaking and unpredictable global business environment. This turbulent business environment is compared with work-life experiences of older workers as captured by the literature dealing with career plateaus. The career plateau literature demonstrates that older workers may be marginalised by career plateaus and prevented from contributing to the work of global organisations.

‘Career plateau’ was the term most frequently used by case study participants to provide a high-level summary of their perceived, sub-optimal work circumstances. Included
with the career plateau literature is a summary of a supplementary study of younger people’s work experiences. This supplementary study was commissioned by this researcher to identify similarities and differences in the work experiences of younger and older workers and to provide some insight into whether younger worker attributes are in alignment with global business trends.

Chapter 4 contains the focus literature dealing with the ‘boundaryless career’. This emerging career literature is said by some researchers to align the notion of a career with the needs of contemporary global business environments.

Chapter 5 presents the parent literature surrounding motivation/ work satisfiers and job design features for workers. This literature complements the ‘career plateau’ literature but provides a stark contrast to the ‘boundaryless career’ literature and its organisation-centric focus.

A schematic explaining the content and linkages of the three literature review Chapters – Chapters 3, 4 and 5 – has already been shown in Figure 1.10.

In combination, these bodies of knowledge illuminate a significant variance between the ongoing organisational labour needs of the future and the state of preparedness of older workers to adjust to these needs. An understanding of this variance provides an avenue for assessing the potential impact of government intentions to retain older workers in extended careers, at a time of growing shortages of skilled labour.

3.2 Literature review: twenty-first century business

3.2.1 Overview

The literature contained in Section 3.2 is a combination of practitioner and scholarly research about business and work. Much of the practitioner observation was sourced from management consultant contributions to the McKinsey Quarterly, which is produced by one of the world’s leading global management consultancies, and the Australian Financial Review. This researcher chose this approach because he wanted the business context for this thesis to be informed by the perspectives of current practice
as well as theory. This approach also appeared to provide a sound way of identifying the critical work-related issues accompanying contemporary business practice.

There is broad agreement between practitioners and scholars that information technology is enabling an ongoing shift towards global economics, key elements of which are global business focuses on costs, innovation and flexibility, outsourcing and supply chain management, telecommuting and downsizing. There has been a growth in the numbers of knowledge workers. (Ahlawat & Ahlawat, 2006; Ciscel & Smith, 2005; Harenstam, 2005; Mamaghani, 2006; Minnick & Ireland, 2005; Roper, 2004.)

Section 3.2 provides an overview of the operating environment that organisations are currently experiencing.

3.2.2 Globalisation: work is relocating around the world

There is agreement worldwide that business environments are turbulent and that national borders are permeable. There has been a growth over recent years in the number of international economies, in trade, and decreasing transportation and communication costs. (Andersen, 2006). Capital is all-powerful and is not confined by national borders; computer developments provide more global options that are further enabled by an ever faster and more expansive broadband internet. Davis and Stephenson writing in the McKinsey Quarterly (April 2006) predict profound shifts in economic activity at both global and regional levels. For example, Davis and Stephenson reported escalating increases in cross-border trade as a percentage of global GDP which was at a level of 18% in 1990 and was estimated to rise to a level of 30% by 2015. The number of regional trade agreements had grown from fifty in 1990 to 250 by 2005.

Major changes are occurring at the level of individual countries and communities within countries as well. ‘Massive relocations of people including immigrants, temporary workers, retirees, and visitors are occurring. The greatest relocations will involve young, well-educated workers flocking to the cities of the developed world’ Johnston (1991). In addition, Johnston reported that ‘millions of women in industrialising nations are entering the paid workforce’.
According to Andersen (2006, p. 102), most researchers agree that the ‘ongoing reorganisation of production following the extended outsourcing, offshoring, and internationalization of sourcing is a sign that new organisational patterns are replacing existing forms’. A significant new form of organisational pattern, according to Andersen, involves the formation of regional clusters. An interesting example involves a cluster of 350 organisations in the greater Copenhagen area which specialises in SAP enterprise resource planning system software development and production. The European Union is a more familiar example of a regional cluster.

Castells (1997) takes issue with Johnston’s proposition that massive relocations are occurring. Castells is critical of Johnston’s view that ‘If there is a global economy, it should be a global market and a global labor force’ (Johnston 1991 as reported in Castells, 1997, p. 232). Castells thinks Johnston’s statement appears to be correct on the surface, in a literal sense, but he considers it empirically wrong and analytically misleading. In rebutting Johnston, Castells argues that whilst ‘capital flows freely in the electronic circuits of global financial networks, labour remains highly constrained by institutions, culture, borders, police and xenophobia’. Castells quotes Campbell (1994) as an authority who has found that only 1.5% of the global workforce worked outside its home country in 1993 and half of these people were from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

It is possible that both Castells and Johnston could be correct. At an intuitive level, it appears likely that global markets and businesses may eventually lead to a global workforce. However, the workforce may not need to personally relocate to other countries, particularly if the work is enabled by communications technology – a technology that allows organisations to disassociate their information from their organisation structures. Put another way, people can work anywhere provided they can access the organisation’s information. Already, information technology enables workers to work in global teams comprised of people living in multiple countries. Australian customers of Dell computers, for example, have their complaints managed and resolved from a call centre in Malaysia. In 1995 there were 4 million teleworkers in the USA, but by 2000 the number had grown to 23.6 million (Mamaghani, 2006).
There is much evidence of business turbulence because of these contributors – including undervalued stock options and court cases underpinned by questionable corporate ethics (de Janasz et al., 2003). This turbulence provides intricate problems for organisations in the struggle for response. According to Davis and Stephenson, there will be increasing scrutiny of big business as globalisation activities expand. Increased demand for natural resources and pressure on the environment are predicted and already evident.

Castells suggests that adoption of employment practices whereby employees relocate to another country to work will require some transitional time before going to broadly based acceptance. There is a body of literature dealing with expatriate employment that supports Castells view. Workers can experience many problems when they move to another country for work. These problems can include family relocation and host country culture and acceptance difficulties. In addition, expatriates returning to their country of origin often face problems that can include returning to employment with less scope, less authority and less financial rewards (Murrowood, 2006).

This discussion suggests that global careers that involve physical relocation may not be for everybody, and that transitional time and thinking space will likely be necessary before there is widespread acceptance of this way of working. Nevertheless, changes in the nature of work and the environment where work is performed are occurring and, over time, an expansion of the range of possibilities for both workers and the organisations that employ them should evolve. Challenges in respect of global workforces include the ability of the employer to provide effective feedback to employees when the manager has never met the worker on a face-to-face basis and when the work is performed in different countries with fundamental differences in culture, and different time zones.

**3.2.3 New business models: jobs are being shaped by a short-term profit focus**

Because institutional investors attract new funds under management through quarterly benchmarking, organisations and their investors have a high concentration on short-term fund performance outcomes, often at the cost of investment in corporate projects that deliver returns over the longer term (Business Council of Australia, 2004).
The Business Council study found that due to the growing complexity of markets and their influences, ‘short-termism is increasingly a driver of market behaviour and a potential constraint on longer term value creation’.

Davis and Stephenson (2006) pointed to the emergence of radical new global industry structures and business models, which are being driven by changing market regulation, new technologies and new funding models such as private equity financing. A recent example is the private equity raid on Australian company Coles Myer, which threatened a fundamental change in ownership. A multi-national consortium headed by George Roberts of Kohlberg Kravis Roberts was widely reported by Australia’s business press to have made an initial bid for ownership of Coles Myer. According to the *Australian Financial Review*, the mention of the name of George Roberts ‘sends shudders through the Boards and CEOs of underperforming companies’ (Clegg & Hughes, 2006). A little further into this article, these journalists reported the global chief executive of UBS, a major organisation in the finance industry, as noting that nine out of the top ten fee-paying clients on New York’s Wall Street were now private equity funds.

The *Australian Financial Review* (Evans & Hughes, 21 August 2006, pp. 1 and 16) reported that the bid for Coles Myer using private equity financing had led the Board of Coles Myer to consider breaking up the business into distinct business entities in order ‘to repel the raiders’. Subsequently, the Board announced a reduction of 2,500 head office staff; one in three.

People working within Coles Myer reported to this researcher that company restructuring had accelerated, with the pressure on the Board coming from the global bid for company ownership. Senior people were leaving the company, resulting in potential leadership gaps and the direct reports to those now absent leaders becoming confused about authority structures and whether previous strategies and tactical directions would continue as the organisation implemented radical restructuring. This situation suggests that companies require managers skilled in managing transitions through turbulent times. Such skill would include possessing the courage, commitment and vision to find an appropriate course and to lead anxious subordinate workers.
3.2.4 Changing consumer relationships: jobs must respond to the demands of more aggressive customers

Globalisation and technological advancements have created a proliferation of new products and services, which in turn has led to greater segmentation of customers who are said to be far more demanding than in the past. Marketers and marketing departments are having difficulty dealing with the explosion of new customer segments, sales and service channels, media, marketing approaches to products and brands. In response, many companies are taking quick-fix approaches by bolting on new channels, new brands and new marketing programs, all of which frequently leads to increased costs, complexity and reduced organisational agility (Court et al., 2006).

These demanding customers have been encouraged to expect considerable choice. This has caused an explosion in customer segments. For example, in the wireless telecommunications market, three demographically oriented consumer segments have expanded to more than twenty. Instead of the baby boomers representing a single segment, the industry has created six or eight with segments differentiated by usage tendencies and product needs. Other changes to traditional patterns include a reduction in the middle range accompanied by growth at the high cost, low cost extremes. According to Court et al. this situation applies to cars, computers, and many retailing revenues.

As mentioned above, Court et al. asserted that the market has responded to this proliferation by adding new brands, and new segment strategies with a consequential requirement for new segment managers, new segment channel program managers and, most recently, new strategies for involving communication vehicles such as the World Wide Web. It is not difficult to appreciate that these responses potentially added costs and could cause many problems associated with managing the interdependencies across channels and segments. There are potential management problems associated with the growth of experts/knowledge workers, who are introduced across the business and wish their expertise to be recognised and to prevail in organisational debate. This complexity could lower customer satisfaction and, accordingly, Court et al. recommended a holistic and sophisticated approach for designing and executing the customer relationship.
Implicit in this business expansion is the requirement for the analysis of customer behaviours and the organisation’s ability and capacity to satisfy those requirements. Court et al. claimed that centralised market analysis systems, in lieu of local experts, could not drill deeply enough into customer characteristics to satisfy the sensitivity necessary to properly understand their requirements. This implied a level of local expertise and skills that included the ability to maintain relationships over time, the capacity to tackle problems in a holistic way, the ability to manage organisational cultures and the possession of certain personal behaviours. These personnel attributes included the ability of management and leadership to see and act beyond their own parochial interests, to listen well, to have sophisticated analytical and current technical skills and to possess the ability to influence outcomes (Anderson, circa 2000). Despite these needs, there is a severe talent shortage within the marketing and advertising industries. Companies are now reporting that ‘they are searching for and in most cases failing to find executives who can cover both and old and new (digital) media’ (Shoebridge, 2006).

Consumers can witness the difficulties that organisations experience in dealing with customers whilst managing costs down. A trend towards customers performing part of the work of the organisation can be identified, representing a further shift in the nature of the traditional organisation and its relationship with customers. A somewhat uneasy adult type of dependency between organisations and customers is forced in this process whilst organisations focus on greater product choice for customers. Call centres in foreign countries, voice-activated responses and websites that do not contain complaint avenues provide examples of these changing relationships. Court et al. described today’s customers as tyrants; in the past, the customer was king and was always right. It appears far more complex these days, with organisations torn between profit, cost and service as they seek to satisfy the tyrant, according to Davis and Stephenson (2006). These researchers predicted a rapid expansion of public sector customer service activities, primarily to cater for population ageing.
3.2.5 Jobs are increasingly being outsourced as part of supply chains

Outsourcing is another cause of turbulence. Outsourcing within Australia and to other countries continues to be an important part of many business models as organisations seek to focus on their core activities, reduce costs, overcome skills shortages in Australia and force customers into various levels of self-service (Meredith, 2006).

Prominent information technology consultancy Gartner estimated that one of every twenty USA technology jobs would have moved offshore by 2005 (Brooks, 2006). According to Ahlawat and Ahlawat (2006), the movement offshore of professional workers is a relatively new trend; they contend that manufacturing jobs have been moving offshore for thirty years. Outsourcing involves the use of external agents to perform one or more organisational activities (Brooks, 2006). Manufacturing, technical support, back office functions, distribution and other components of the supply chain are being outsourced to other organisations and to lower-cost countries. Outsourcing follows a process where significant activities of a business, or service provider, are no longer undertaken within the organisation but are assumed by a supplier under contract (Merrifield, 2006). A principal cost reduction target objective is 20% reduction, usually achieved through savings from direct labour and variable costs (Elliott, 2006). Other reasons for outsourcing include time saving or improved service delivery, and the need to access skills and technology that are not available to the organisation (Brooks, 2006).

Outsourcing has also evolved from organisational strategies designed to hive off non-core activities and encourage the organisation to concentrate on its core competencies (Thomas & Wilkinson, 2006; Ciscel & Smith, 2005). These authors emphasised that an important and often overlooked reason for foreign outsourcing was that it allowed organisations to bypass dysfunctional and costly sales and distribution business models that had evolved over the past forty years. Thomas and Wilkinson (2006) argued that distribution models had taken a disproportionate share of the value of the supplying company’s products; outsourcing could enable the manufacturer to regain control of their distribution model. Ciscel and Smith (2005) held a slightly different but broadly consistent view in stating that, in the past, inventory management used to receive only minor attention but, in their view, this had changed because of today’s emphasis on
flexibility and speed across long distances. They claimed that the transition was changing work processes and employment conditions at a fundamental level towards greater levels of flexibility. Ciscel and Smith also claimed that these workplace changes were leading to increased fragmentation, disorientation, and more chaotic personal lives.

A popular trend involves outsourcing information technology to lower-cost countries where there are ‘talented workers at much lower costs’ (Kakumanu & Portanova, 2006). Control is exercised through global project management, service level agreements and confidentiality contracts. The work frequently embraces applications development, applications maintenance, personal computer maintenance, systems maintenance, data centre operations, systems development and telecommunications/LAN (Fish & Seydel, 2006). In an OECD panel discussion (OECD, 2006), the President of the American Federation of Labour Congress of Industrial Organisations warned that ‘in China there is no protection of workers’ rights’ and suggested that if it was good for business to protect intellectual property rights, then similar benefits should be accorded to workers rights.

Brooks (2006, p. 5) pointed out that there were significant impacts on staff effected by outsourcing. These impacts could include increased occupational stress, less job security, less personal commitment, less job satisfaction, less motivation, new psychological contracts, less job involvement, new turnover intention, and less job tenure.

There are international flow-on effects of outsourcing to lower-cost countries, which could be expected to impact the provision of goods and services in the future. For example, significant changes to consumer spending patterns are predicted as people in developing countries, principally China and India, begin to acquire discretionary income. Between 2006 and 2015 this spend is estimated to increase by the equivalent of the current spending power of Western Europe (Davis & Stephenson, 2006).
3.2.6 Jobs require information and communication technology skills

Davis and Stephenson (2006) claimed that the world was presently at the ‘early not mature, stage of the (technology) revolution’; a point supported during an OECD panel discussion by Basile J Neiadas, CEO, OPAP SA, Greece (OECD, 2006). During this discussion, Neiadas referred to research that had concluded that ‘the knowledge available to people today represents only five percent of the knowledge that will be available in 2020’. As a consequence, Neiadas proposed that tomorrow’s ‘good jobs’ would be ‘knowledge based and connected to Information Technology’. Neiadas predicted that ‘over the next twenty years, half of the world’s professions as currently constituted, may disappear’, and that ‘the same will happen in corporations where many positions will cease to exist and others will change’. Neiadas suggested that the environment, advanced production methods and human resource management would provide important job growth opportunities in the years ahead.

The economics of knowledge is changing. Traditional approaches to ownership of knowledge are being challenged as ownership shifts from the individual to communities (Davis & Stephenson). This represents a fundamental shift in the traditional notion of information as personal power. When information is made generally available, jobs change fundamentally, bureaucracy dissipates and innovation increases. Knowledge production is clearly growing rapidly – worldwide patent applications rose from 1990 to 2004 at a rate of 20% annually (Stephenson & Davis). Already evident is the ‘ubiquitous’ access to information through search engines such as Google.

Bryan and Joyce (2005) argued that knowledge workers could better be described as professional and that such a description applies to more than 25% of employees in large companies, particularly those providing financial services, health care, high technology, pharmaceuticals, and media and entertainment. These authors asserted that this percentage is growing as professional jobs grow and expand in the direction of taking responsibility for most of the key line activities as well as the innovation function. Consistent with this notion of professionalism, business leaders are replacing ‘gut instinct’ with sophisticated software and algorithmic decision-making; in so doing, they are turning management from an art to a science (Davis & Stephenson).
A profound change in the source of talent is predicted by Davis and Stephenson. They claim that it will be more profound than the migration of low-skill jobs to low-wage countries. Davis and Stephenson reported that there were thirty-three million university-educated young professionals in developing countries – more than double the number in developed countries. Connors (2006), writing in the *Australian Financial Review*, reported on this theme in a front-page article entitled ‘Skilled Jobs Next in the Race Offshore’. This article referred to an intention of mining company Rio Tinto to contract out ‘highly skilled computer projects to India and that this was in line with trends by banks, insurance groups, resources companies and some government departments’.

### 3.2.7 Organisations are becoming less permanent and less bureaucratic

The breaking down of bureaucratic and organisationally contained careers in favour of a growth in professional and entrepreneurial careers was predicted by Kanter (1990). Implicit in this change was the loss of career identity and changed values and commitment from an organisation focus to an individual focus, loyalty to the profession and self rather than to the organisation (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994). Harenstam (2005) and Roper (2004) observed that the ‘new world of work’ had features that include increasing employment insecurity, reduced career prospects and employer demands for increased flexibility and innovation. Harenstam (2005) has reported on the growth of benchmarking, and increased use of key performance indicators as tools for driving performance and improvement.

In describing his ‘shamrock organisation’, Handy (1989, p. 70) observed that the world of work was changing and that this was because organisations were being judged on their performance more harshly than in the past. The increased use of benchmarking and key performance indicators was predicted by Handy, who argued that the role of organisations was becoming clearer, with a primary focus on results. It is ‘not its [the organisation’s] job to be everyone’s alternative community, providing meaning and work for all for life; nor is its job to be another arm of the state… employing the handicapped and the disadvantaged…’ Handy also observed a change in the language of business. Organisations were once described in engineering terms, ‘with largely
interchangeable human parts’, and spoken of in terms of outputs, structures and their systems and control devises. He perceived a shift away from engineering and machine language to a new language of politics, relationships, cultures, networks, teams and coalitions of influence or power – leadership rather than management. Handy coined the term ‘shamrock organisation’, referring to an organisation comprised of three very different groups of people, each with different expectations, managed differently, paid differently and organised differently. The first group were the highly rewarded core – professionals, technicians and managers. They owned the organisational knowledge and commit themselves to organisational success through their expertise and long working hours. The second group were contractors and sub-contractors supplying goods and services. The third leaf of the shamrock consisted of the flexible labour force – part-time workers and temporary workers. This group allowed the satisfaction of peaks and troughs in demand.

Another perspective of the modern organisation was provided by the metaphor of the ‘hard-wired/soft-wired’ organisation structure proposed by Evans and Wurster (2000). In their model, the ‘hard-wired structure’ was the conventional organisation structure reflected by the high cost of establishing information channels. They pointed out that, as information technology costs fell, the organisation could become ‘soft-wired’, thereby enabling people to group and regroup into teams. People could work on multiple projects simultaneously, fundamentally changing the organisation structure. Spans of control were proportional to reach. Evans and Wurster found that if the span of control was doubled, the number of layers in the hierarchy could usually be halved. ‘Soft’ wiring enabled flexibility, and access to information. If everybody was given access to organisational information, as could happen with the intranet, many people across an organisation could work on the same issue, thereby adding more perspectives and expertise to the outcome. This greater access to information has implications for management control and trust. This is because the hard-wired systems restricted access to information and limited the control of information, often to an individual, thereby limiting the ability of others to attribute blame because of the inherently limited transparency of the information. In that situation, data were collected and managed (and sometimes massaged) at source. On this basis, Evans and Wurster argued that ‘fluidity, flatness and trust’ were fundamental ingredients in the new organisational
model. Research has demonstrated that information technology is facilitating the centralisation of power and control, even though organisation structures are becoming less permanent and less bureaucratic. Information technology can enable workplaces to be managed and monitored remotely (Harenstam, 2005).

This researcher has experienced the hard-wired/soft-wired organisation structure model described by Evans and Wurster. In his own work, the researcher has found that large centralised mainframe information systems and some traditional distributed systems operated like concrete irrigation ditches. Their electronic channels delivered information to set organisational functions whose operations were built around that information. The organisation structure was set firm in concrete with information delivery to those structures. The costs, time, and potential for failure associated with major changes to large systems are legend, and so, like the farmer with his old-style concrete ditches, it seems initially more prudent for an organisation to remain with its existing information structure: after all, no one can absolutely guarantee better thinking from new information. Such a prudent action, however, is likely to result in sub-optimal results and the erosion of competitive advantage (Walker & McCarthy, 1996).

In undertaking these fundamental changes to the organisation’s information structures, timeliness, new levels of accuracy and access arrangements, Walker and McCarthy witnessed severe resistance at every level of the organisation, which they attributed to the need for a considerable period of transitional time or space so that people could understand the impact of the changes on themselves and then incorporate those changes satisfactorily into their organisational life.

Handy (1995, p. 71) used the term ‘portfolio’ to describe ‘an approach to life ‘where life is comprised of a collection of different activities, including ‘bits and pieces of work, like a share portfolio’. There was a core, providing the ‘essential wherewithal for life’. Handy (p. 70) quoted Britain’s Elizabeth Vallance as stating that existential development was the primary aim not of business but of churches or educational or artistic institutions.

At the time of Handy’s writing about contemporary business practice as he saw it (1995), organisations – in Australia at least – were not yet dealing with a skilled labour
supply problem that had become broadly accepted as real by 2006. Despite the increased focus on business performance foreseen by Handy, skilled labour shortages increased the bargaining power of the workforce, making it a legitimate business concern of employers to try to satisfy the needs of its workforce as a retention strategy and as a strategy to optimise productivity.

On the cover of a subsequent book, Handy (1995) wrote:

*The empty raincoat is, to me, the symbol of our most pressing paradox. If economic progress means that we become anonymous cogs in some great machine, then progress is an empty promise. The challenge must be to show how paradox can be managed.*

### 3.2.8 More part-time work and more project teams

In many organisations and in the organisation that is the subject of this study, Australia Post, there has been a substantial increase in the amount of part-time work, and a corresponding reduction in the number of full-time jobs over recent years. For example, in the six years between 1999 and 2005, the number of full-time employees reduced from 28,205 to 25,851 (in 2005) and part-time staff grew from 6,756 to 8,953 (Australia Post annual reports 2000 and 2005). In contrast to the Banai and Harry (2004) assertion of increased time-sharing or job sharing and flex-time, these job features have not been encouraged or developed at Australia Post. An increase in the number of project teams has been observed. Project teams have been formed to plan and implement change; they are being formed at every organisational level, including the shop floor where the introduction of team-based work is evident as a potentially useful means of providing job enrichment and for optimising automated systems. This can be seen to have resulted in an up-skilling and multi-skilling of the workforce, as predicted by Banai and Harry.

Virtual teams are being established by some organisations as a way of reducing real estate overheads and improving customer service, profits and productivity. Some organisations claim environmental benefits from virtual teams, and virtual teams allow experts from around the world to collaborate on a project without incurring the cost and
inconvenience of travel. These benefits are claimed as a consequence of enabling technologies and because workers can be on the road dealing with customers face-to-face, rather than being ensconced in the office (Cascio, 2000).

In summary, jobs are changing fundamentally through enabling information technology systems, which many say are not yet mature. If this is true, then the future of jobs is extremely difficult to predict. Nevertheless, it is clear that jobs are becoming more transitory, more profit and customer focused, and that they are increasingly forming part of national and international supply chains and depending more and more on information technology and communication skills.

### 3.2.9 Workforce characteristics

#### 3.2.9.1 The twenty-first-century manager

Eminent management consulting firm Boston Consulting, as reported by Hatch (2006) in the *Australian Financial Review* made predictions about the characteristics of twenty-first-century managers. This is presented in a modified format in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTERISTIC</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Global edge</td>
<td>Greater proportion of career overseas. Need to develop strong language and inter-cultural skills. Solid understanding of supply chain management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-generational skills</td>
<td>Three generations under one roof.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People performance</td>
<td>Heavy reliance on people. New ways of improving performance required. Union awards and restrictive labour practices largely removed. Measuring human capital performance using metrics will increase in importance and will be a part of each manager’s day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible approach</td>
<td>More workers want part-time and casual employment. Workers want flexible career paths, hours of work, including start and finish times, length of working week and location of work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist skills</td>
<td>Requirement for generalist management skills is declining. Strong industry expertise, ability to communicate ideas clearly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative style</td>
<td>Employees will be given autonomy to solve problems, be creative and find clever solutions to unfamiliar situations. Managers required to nurture and develop these skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full utilisation of female workers</td>
<td>All roadblocks facing women at work will need to be removed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic approach to the organisation’s interests</td>
<td>Requirement to manage for the organisation’s ‘long-term corporate and ecological health’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team approach</td>
<td>Facilitator of a team of experts. Environment where employees are encouraged to speak up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rounded individuals</td>
<td>The challenge for future managers is to balance pressures of work/ life, remain healthy and not burn out.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Table constructed by author using content developed by the Boston Consulting Group (2006).*
3.2.9.2 The twenty-first-century worker

A report prepared by the Business Council of Australia (2002), which drew on work undertaken by the Department of Education, Science and Training, and on the Australian National Training Authority and Australian Government reports, summarised the personal attributes of members of twenty-first-century general workforce, as shown in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Worker attributes of the twenty-first-century worker (Business Council of Australia, 2002)

- loyalty
- commitment
- honesty and integrity
- enthusiasm
- reliability
- personal presentation
- common sense
- positive self-esteem
- sense of humour
- balanced attitude to work and home life
- ability to deal with pressure
- motivation
- adaptability

Source: Table constructed by author using content developed by the Business Council of Australia (2002).

The Business Council of Australia stated that the worker of the future would need to possess the following skills:
Table 3.3: Worker skills required for the twenty-first-century worker (Business Council of Australia)

- communication skills
- team working skills
- problem-solving skills
- initiative and enterprise skills
- planning and organising skills
- self-management skills
- learning skills
- technology skills

Source: Table constructed by author using content developed by the Business Council of Australia (2002).

In the executive summary, the Business Council of Australia pointed out that Australia was the fourteenth largest economy in the world and that this achievement resulted from factors including Australia’s capacity to change to meet contemporary circumstances.

Australia’s position in the world provides a level of credibility when considering these skills and attributes in a global context. The attributes of the twenty-first-century manager envisaged by the Boston Consulting Group show that there are evident differences in the attributes, capabilities and behaviours of managers and of the general workforce that they manage.

It is possible that the skills and personal attributes listed above for workers are Australian-centric skills, required for success in Australia. The identified skills and personal attributes do not appear to be tightly coupled with the emerging global business models discussed in earlier sections of this chapter; they are strongly oriented towards the so called ‘soft skills’ rather than leading edge hard/technology skills. Absent is a strong emphasis on working with ambiguity, managing anxiety, and self-sufficiency to the level that is likely to be required by a worker pursuing a
'boundaryless career’. On the other hand, the twenty-first-century manager specifications appear to be broadly in alignment with, or more focused on, the needs of the emerging global organisation; strong people skills, a global focus and strong industry and specialist technical knowledge are emphasised.

3.2.10 Conclusion
Globalisation and its enabling technology can be seen to be facilitating new business models which are not constrained by national borders. There is an abundance of investment capital and a drive for short-term profit on that investment. The new business models are less permanent than in the past, and there is a strong emphasis on technology and changed relationships with customers who are more aggressive and less loyal. There are new supplier relationships, through supply chains and other outsourcing which now provide many of the goods and services that were once supplied by employees. Organisations can be seen to be vibrant and radical and buffeted by continuous change. This environment means that organisations are no longer in control of their destiny in the way that they once were.

Management skills for the future have been predicted to focus on being a well-rounded individual who adopts a collaborative style and has strengths in relating to a diverse range of people, possesses current industry and technology expertise, and adopts a global and flexible approach. According to the Business Council of Australia, workers will need good self-management and interpersonal skills. They will need to be enthusiastic, honest, loyal and committed team players with an interest in continuous learning and technology adoption.

A point was made in the literature that the use of technology is not mature at this time, and so the trends described above can be expected to exacerbate over time (OECD, 2006). Nevertheless, some moderation to these trends can be expected as pressure mounts for better treatment of disadvantaged cohorts sometimes referred to as the ‘tragedy of commons’. This term was developed in the Middle Ages and has been described by Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz in the following way: ‘When there is a common resource that can be used freely by all, each user fails to think about how his actions might harm others; each loses sight of the common good’
(Stiglitz, 2006, p. 162). Stiglitz believed that there was growing acknowledgement that ‘all is not well with globalisation’. The areas that he believed were gaining high-level focus were poverty, the need for foreign assistance and debt relief for the world’s poorest countries, fair trade arrangements, a need to limit the liberalisation of rules for doing business, including any impacts they might have on global governance, and environmental protection.

Despite any corrections that may be effected, more globalisation, innovation and learning by workers at all levels seems inevitable. Consequently, it is likely to be valid to assume a continuation of the twenty-first-century business trends outlined in Section 3.1 of this chapter, together with a need for an escalation of personal development by workers at every organisational level.

3.3 Literature review: career plateaus

3.3.1 Overview

The first part of this chapter has identified key characteristics of twenty-first-century work. The remaining component of this chapter considers the older workforce against those characteristics by reviewing the literature on career plateaus. Many older worker participants in this study used the term ‘career plateau’ as a broad descriptor of their experience of work.

Twenty-first-century work has been described as dynamic and unpredictable, and conducted within the world of global business. This dynamism will be seen to contrast with the more mundane world of work that is experienced by many plateaued workers, both older workers and those commencing their careers. In addition to a discussion of the career plateau literature, there is a brief summary of complementary research that was commissioned into the work experiences of younger workers at Australia Post, some of whom demonstrated signs of career plateau. This brief summary concludes the chapter.
3.3.2 Career plateau: definitions, explanations and vagaries

Montgomery (2002), in her extensive literature review on career plateauing, reported that the first usage of the term was by Warren, Ference and Stoner (1975) in a seminal article that appeared in the *Harvard Business Review*. That article centered on three main characters and their career stories: the founder and owner of a successful business; a plateaued vice-president; and a younger, high-performing, tertiary-qualified direct report of the vice-president, who is successfully adopting a consultative approach that is at odds with the authoritarian and historically successful style of both vice-president and owner. Whilst the owner accepts the need for the management style change, the vice-president is challenged by it as it is fundamentally different to the approach that had made him successful in the past. The business dilemma presented by this case concerns what the owner should do about the long-serving, loyal and previously well-performing vice-president. Options range from forced retirement through to retraining, and include problem avoidance by transferring the high-performing young person. A salient feature of the plateaued vice-president was his tendency to focus on the job of his direct report rather than his own, higher level job. The vice-president was unable to leave his past responsibilities and focus on what would have been a more ambiguous and higher level role. These broad themes will be pursued in greater depth in this review.

There is a lack of definitional precision evident in the career plateau literature, and the most popular definition cited below was developed before the onset of much of the change to business described at the beginning of this chapter as twenty-first-century work. This applies particularly to those changes resulting in flatter organisation structures and the greater focus on relationships rather than hierarchical position.

This researcher is attracted to the dictionary definition of ‘plateau’ rather than the academic versions because it suggests impacts beyond hierarchical promotion. The *Macquarie Dictionary* defines a plateau as ‘a period of little or no progress in an individual's learning, marked by temporary constancy in speed, number of errors committed, etc., and indicated by a flat stretch on a graph’. The *Macquarie* emphasis is on a halt to learning as opposed to promotion or progression within the organisation.
From an academic literature perspective, ‘career plateau’ was defined in 1977 ‘as the point in a career where the likelihood of additional hierarchical promotion is very low’ (Ference, Stoner & Warren in Duffy, 2000). Some years later, Lemire, Saba and Gagnon (1999) included, in their article, a definition of ‘career plateau’ that seems to better reflect contemporary business. These scholars referred ‘to the feeling of failure or frustration that individuals may experience following a temporary or permanent halt in the progression of their career’.

Ference et al. identified two components of career plateau: organisational (sometimes referred to as structural) and personal. Organisational or structural plateauing occurs when there is a lack of career opportunities within an organisation. This happens when the organisational structure, as determined by the business, limits career opportunities.

The personal plateau is another type of plateau that has been identified by researchers. Personal plateauing, according to Ference et al. involves an employee becoming unsuitable for further promotion. Such judgments, of course, can be sound or flawed, as they are frequently based on perception or perhaps even more sinister considerations such as the strategic removal of a detractor. It is reasonable to ask: What is unsuitable? Who determines suitability? And on what basis has a judgement been formed? Bardwick (1986) added the perspective that personal plateauing could occur when an individual lacked direction and enthusiasm for both work and non-work activities. This was also sometimes referred to as ‘life plateauing’, which Bardwick argued ‘is vastly more serious than either structural or content plateauing, because it involves the sense that there is little fulfillment in any area of life’ (p. 100). Bardwick presented life plateauing as a psychological state that caused the individual to feel obliged to honour past commitments that they might no longer feel attached to; and a sense that the future offered nothing other than more of the same. It seemed that personal or life plateauing might be out of the control of the individual worker, and the employer, as well, as life plateauing could be determined by organisational perception, a depressive type of illness or an inability of the worker to alter their career circumstances.

Bardwick (1986) contributed the concept of the ‘content plateau’ to describe an end to learning and challenge that could occur when an individual had mastered all aspects of
the job. According to Bardwick, content plateauing was likely to occur when a person had occupied the same job from three to five years. This time span was thought by her to represent a sufficient time for ‘responsibilities and problems (to) feel repetitive’. Lee (2003) developed Bardwick’s work by creating the term ‘professional plateau’, which subsumed the ‘content plateau’ but also added consideration of the capacity of the job to enable new skills to be developed irrespective of the length of job tenure. Nachbagauer (2002) provided an example of Lee’s contribution to Bardwick’s theory in his study of the career plateaus of university staff and school teachers. These professionals could be seen to continue to learn despite remaining in the same job for extended periods of time. Importantly, Lee’s research indicated that additional work content could moderate the negative impacts of perceptions of minimal opportunities for promotion.

Excessive job tenure has generally been shown by researchers to be the primary contributor to content plateauing, and age and tenure have been found to be negatively correlated with job mobility. Groot and Verberne (1997) reported that ‘in all countries investigated in OECD (1993), age/tenure profiles are positively sloped up to the age of approximately fifty-five’, when country specific factors such as superannuation policies can change behaviour. That is, tenure has been found to increase or decrease after age fifty-five, depending on country-specific policies, whereas tenure increases with age up to age fifty-five. These researchers reported that older people tended to have reasonably stable employment relationships, with most job mobility occurring in the early years of working life. Based on data covering the years 1985-1988, which related to several thousand Dutch physical workers, Groot and Verberne made the following important observations. They found that mobility rates declined with age and that all factors which determined job mobility became more unfavourable as the worker ages. Groot and Verberne also found that tenure increased the cost of mobility, resulting in older workers incurring higher costs of mobility. Consequently they concluded that, with age, ‘it becomes increasingly unlikely that a worker will change to a job with more physically arduous conditions’. This researcher thinks that, on an intuitive basis, it might be possible to extend this finding to the knowledge worker who could feel similarly; that is, the knowledge worker could become increasingly unlikely to change to a less intellectually stimulating job, particularly if the new job was a full-time job.
3.3.3 Career plateau: a work in progress

Lee (2003) observed that few empirical studies exist that differentiate the various types of plateau. Perhaps this was explained by Chao (1990) who argued, quite reasonably, that objective measures failed to accurately measure personal perceptions of plateau. Chao also postulated that career plateaus might be just one facet of a general plateau, and that there could be different degrees of plateau-ness. These views have been corroborated by Hall (1985), whose study of an engineering plant found that widespread differences existed between the career experiences of both plateaued and non-plateaued managers.

Nachbagauer (2002) thought that although the research on career plateaus began more than twenty years ago, it remained a particularly relevant topic despite the currently apparently low level of researcher interest in the topic. Nachbagauer based his relevance argument on the fact that the majority of the theory and practice research into careers generally and career plateaus was developed before ‘recent changes in the organisation of work, and the workforce, became well established’.

Montgomery (2002), a librarian, undertook an extensive review of the literature and has confirmed Nachbagauer’s contention that research into career plateaus has been limited. Montgomery reported that ‘career plateaus’, as a subject heading, could be found in the Library of Congress catalogue and in four of the Wilson Indexes: Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature, Business Index, Social Sciences Abstracts and Education Index, and as an identifier by ERIC (Montgomery, 2002). However, Montgomery observed that most published articles were in business periodicals with a focus on career plateauing as a management problem. She observed that the ‘few articles which are addressed directly to employees’ were more likely to be found in general, non-scholarly periodicals.

The career plateau literature is almost unanimous in portraying plateauing as a negative (Nicholson, 1993; Montgomery, 2002). In addition, Montgomery has reported that virtually all the articles focus ‘narrowly’ on two types of career plateauing: structure and content plateaus. She appeared to lament that researchers had largely ignored the issue of life plateauing, which Montgomery asserted ‘is frequently an offshoot of the
other two types of plateauing and has far more serious long-range implications for what people will do with the rest of their lives’.

3.3.4 Career plateaus: pervasive across career and organisational settings

The career plateauing phenomenon appears to apply generally across professions, industries and countries. Lim and Teo (1998) researched the Singaporean police and found that job tenure of greater than six years negatively impacted job satisfaction and organisational commitment and produced a higher incidence of career plateauing. Chau (1998) reported on career plateaus amongst internal auditors. A study of USA bankers by Corzine, Buntzman and Busch (1999) concluded that the expectation of plateauing increased with age.

Rotondo (1999) contended that downsizing and restructuring in the United States was having the effect of causing a lowering of the age when people reached their career plateau with the person in mid-career being the most vulnerable. Broady-Preston and Bell (2001) observed that rapid recent changes in libraries had realigned organisation structures, resulting in the elimination of guaranteed opportunities for advancement, and that this had accelerated the rate of career plateauing amongst library professionals. Feelings of career failure that accompanied inadequate employer career planning, development and support combined with limited opportunities for new work roles were reported by Lemire, Saba and Gagnon (1999), who studied 192 managers and professionals in the Quebec public service. These researchers concluded that ‘the traditional career of our dreams is becoming less and less achievable’.

3.3.5 Career plateau: inevitable, and good and bad

Warren et al (1975) demonstrated that career plateauing might have both negative and challenging connotations. Duffy (2000) suggested more positive consequences, with a view that a career plateau was ‘a time of change, transition, reevaluation and reflection’. Lee (2003) painted a more negative view – one that was more prevalent amongst researchers – in concluding that the career plateau had been used ‘as an antecedent to many undesirable work outcomes such as low satisfaction, high stress, poor performance, and other withdrawal symptoms’. Lee provided some balance to this view
by proposing that a career plateau could also relieve an individual of the stress that had attached to the endless search for upward career progression.

Tremblay and Roger (2004) reported mixed views among researchers on whether a plateaued worker was any less satisfied at work than a person who was yet to plateau. Drawing on research by Slocum et al. (1985), Hall (1985) and Orpen (1983), Tremblay and Roger conclude: that the attitudes and behaviours at work of non-plateaued employees might be worse than those workers who had plateaued. Although this article did not comment on these adverse behaviours, it is possible that behaviours associated with naked ambition used by a powerful individual might have a potentially worse impact than more passive behaviours.

Lee (2003) reported that the ‘basic tenet in prior research’ was that workers ‘care deeply about their careers’ and that plateaus could cause discontent because of negative consequences for salary, power and status. Tremblay and Roger also referred to Ettington (1997), Ference et al. (1977), Nicholson (1993), Slocum et al. (1985) and Veiga (1981), who all reported that reactions to career plateaus changed over time. These researchers found that plateauing could lead to change when the pain of continuing exceeded the risks and pain of embarking on a fundamental job or organisation change to gain control of career, financial situation and so forth.

Duffy (2000) stated that career plateauing ‘is an inevitable occurrence for adult workers given modern workplace complexities’. Bardwick (1986) used the term ‘the rule of ninety-nine percent’ to demonstrate that virtually everybody plateaus at some stage because there are too many people for the available promotions within the hierarchy, a situation exacerbated by today’s flatter organisation structures, which are a consequence of initiatives that have removed management layers and management positions from the hierarchy.

Montgomery (2002) agreed with Bardwick on the inevitability of career plateau, but added that most people would plateau by mid-life, a reality that seems to be borne out by media reports and studies that claim age-based discrimination and stereotyping occurs from about age forty. If Montgomery is correct, and people suffer a career plateau by mid-life, then career plateauing is potentially a serious problem already and it
is likely to have more serious consequences as people are encouraged remain longer in their jobs than they have in the past.

3.3.6 Career plateau: exacerbated by age-based discrimination and stereotyping

Many researchers cited by Tremblay and Roger (2004) found that organisations often placed plateaued employees in positions with less opportunity for enrichment. Research into age-based discrimination in employment has produced evidence of widespread discrimination and stereotyping that has resulted in real or perceived organisational, personal and content plateauing occurring from around forty years of age (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000). Age-based discrimination by employers is difficult to address, as studies have shown that employer attitudes towards older workers are generally consistent across countries, industries and type of employment (Bitman, Flick and Rice, 2001).

A review of the literature on employment practices in Japan, Australia and the United Kingdom (Taylor, Encel and Oka, 2002) found clear evidence that older workers are a disadvantaged group. They found that there was a high degree of consensus amongst researchers that employers continued to discriminate against older workers in Australia, even though they generally recognised the value of the older workers’ experience, reliability and stability. Further, Australian employers considered older workers to be more difficult to train or retrain and that the investment in training was not worthwhile. This trend was found to occur also in the USA and Hong Kong, with research conducted in both countries concluding that older workers were less likely to be hired by employers if high training costs would be incurred (Hirsh, MacPherson and Hardy, 2000).

Taylor et al reported, also, that Australian legislation to ban discrimination had had little effect in providing job opportunities for older workers; that downsizing effected older workers disproportionately to other cohorts and that recruitment agencies were reluctant to accept older workers as clients and reluctant to recommend them to employers. Recruiters who participated in informing this researcher said that they were often reminded, off the record, that the client was the source of the recruiter’s revenue, and
that the client did not want a referral of older workers. Research by Taylor et al. supported this anecdotal ‘covert and evasive’ employer approach with regard to the recruitment of older workers. Taylor et al. reported the use of code words such as ‘overqualified’ were often used, as was the question, ‘How old are your children?’

### 3.3.7 Job design can moderate career plateau

In their substantial and intricate journal article, dealing with the moderating effects that job scope and role ambiguity can have on career plateaus, Tremblay and Roger (2004) reviewed the literature surrounding job characteristics. The article dealt principally with job scope, job design, role clarity and ambiguity, together with job challenge and what is known about their relationships to career plateauing. Tremblay and Rogers included their own research which, significantly, challenged the popular belief that workers seek role clarity as a high priority. In this respect, these researchers found that ‘reactions to career plateauing are more positive for managers who perceive that their job is richer and their role more ambiguous’.

Length of job tenure, supervisor interest and support, job characteristics and job aspirations were all been found by researchers to moderate the influence of career plateauing on attitudes and behaviours. However, Tremblay and Roger claimed that the research had tended to consider these moderators individually and ignored the interactive influence of potential moderators as a system of moderators. Assuming Tremblay and Roger are correct, research into career plateauing could be seriously flawed, as it has not been studied as an interactive, ‘whole system’. To quote international workplace consultant and management author, Alistair Mant (2006), ‘Joined up problems require joined up solutions’.

Whilst Tremblay and Roger collected data from 3,067 Canadian managers to study the interactive impacts of job scope, participation and role ambiguity, a case could be made that these three aspects might not represent the entirety of the system associated with career plateauing. Nevertheless, this study of Canadian managers made a significant contribution in that it concluded that career plateaus and satisfaction with work improved with higher levels of job scope, and that job characteristics could positively
impact career plateaus. These conclusions confirm the relevance of paying greater attention to the phenomenon of job-content plateauing.

Tremblay and Roger believed that when an employee is ‘stretched’ by ‘rich’ job content, their ‘psychological state’ benefited and the individual gained a sense of being valued by the organisation. Interestingly, they also concluded that ‘contrary to evidence in the literature, results show that reactions to career plateauing are more positive for managers who perceive that their job is richer and their role more ambiguous’. The study also found that ‘plateaued managers respond more positively to a job with wider scope than do non-plateaued managers’. These findings offer significant potential for improved productivity through appropriate job designs and managerial environments in an era of unprecedented population ageing with the consequential likelihood of significantly greater numbers of plateaued workers.

As mentioned earlier, Tremblay and Roger found that managers who perceived that they had plateaued, or those with longer job tenure, were more satisfied and more involved when their role was more ambiguous. An appropriate level of ambiguity in a job role, therefore, is potentially a very significant way of improving jobs for a plateaued ageing worker with little opportunity for career enhancement and new learning through promotion. This is because role ambiguity allows scope for the use of prior learning, for self-directed learning, for the use of judgment and wisdom, and provides opportunities for workers to have autonomy and control over the job. On the other hand, it would seem possible that less experienced workers, who are involved in establishing their career, might become stressed by what they regard as unacceptable levels of ambiguity in their job.

The considerable research that has focused on the deleterious features of role ambiguity provides another perspective. It has been found that too much ambiguity may cause employees to be ‘less satisfied with their work and with their immediate supervisor, colleagues, salary, opportunities for advancement and with the work itself’. Tremblay and Roger (2004) cited the work of Rousseau (1978), Fisher and Gitelson (1983), Jackson and Schuler (1985), Lysonski (1985), Glisson and Durick (1988), Cummings et al. (1989), Sawyer (1992), and Breaugh and Colihan (1994) as supporting these negative outcomes from excessive workplace ambiguity. Studies conducted by
Beehr et al. (1980), resulted in findings that role ambiguity could lead employees to think that their efforts would probably not produce desired outcomes and this in turn led to a level of alienation from the workplace as employees placed their discretionary efforts elsewhere. Further, in the absence of employee understanding of the limits of their authority to decide what must be accomplished, there was found to be a consequential hesitancy, by them, to make decisions and this was found to lead to a decline in work performance (Rizzo et al., 1970). The need for alignment of the effort of the workforce is well documented and ambiguity presents a business risk in that regard (Kaplan & Norton, 2006).

It can be concluded from the above research contributions that there are both negative and positive aspects to role ambiguity, and that there is evidence that workers have a tolerance for a certain level of ambiguity. Tremblay and Rogers reported that studies demonstrated no overwhelming links between high levels of ambiguity and intention to leave the employment. They cited the work of Netemeyer et al. (1990) in that regard. However, Tremblay and Rogers also reported that when ambiguity reached critical levels for the individual, individuals tended to look for other opportunities to reduce the tension, in addition to considering the possibility of leaving the organisation. These other opportunities included detachment from work and a refocusing of effort into other endeavours.

An ‘appropriate level of job ambiguity’ might be difficult to determine and have unintended consequences, particularly in the absence of a participative decision-making framework, including a complementary management style and organisational culture. A seminal study of the management of anxiety amongst nurses in a general teaching hospital linked avoidance of anxiety to job designs which resulted in only the most junior nurses being able to be held accountable. The study was initiated to understand stress amongst nurses because it had been felt that the nature of the nursing task was insufficient to explain the high level of stress and anxiety being reported by nurses. The study found that ‘the social defence system represented the institutionalisation of very primitive psychic defence mechanisms’ (Menzies, 1988). The impact of anxiety, as understood by clinical psychologists, has been given only passing attention in this thesis and has not been addressed in the work of Tremblay and Rogers which reported
the beneficial impacts of ambiguity in older manager jobs. The fact that anxiety is given only cursory attention in this thesis represents an important limitation.

It seems that the answer to the dilemma of role ambiguity may lie in the ability of management to specify job requirements in a way that has a focus on minimum critical specification of outcomes, rather than be a precise prescription of duties. In such a situation, there is structure, but also considerable scope for learning, problem-solving and flair. Workers would know how they would be judged and would likely appreciate the scope to achieve outcomes in the way they wish.

Involvement in decision-making, ‘the sharing of managerial power’, may also counteract the negative effects of career plateau. Participation in decision-making has the potential to allow plateaued managers to feel that they are viewed, by their organisation, as competent whilst providing hope that that the duration of plateauing may not be long (Tremblay & Roger, 2004). There is vast literature on the benefits of employee participation and team-based work, which will be reviewed later in the literature analysis.

3.3.8 Personal and managerial responses to career plateauing

It is clear from the above that plateauing is multifaceted and has direct links to productivity. Throughout life, individuals are blocked and plateau in their endeavours; plateaus occur in various contexts at various demographic ages and are arguably most severe when an employee becomes an older worker.

Behavioural psychology provides much evidence to support the conclusion that there are severe limitations to the thinking and reasoning power of the human mind (Riddalls & Bennett, 2003, amongst many others). This body of research, known as ‘bounded rationality’, has been defined by Nobel Prize-winner Herbert Simon in the following terms:
The capacity of the human mind for formulating and solving complex problems is very small compared with the size of the problems whose solution is required for objective rational behaviour in the real world or even for a reasonable approximation to such objective reality.

(Simon 1952, in Riddalls and Bennett, 2003, p. 414)

This means that people experience great difficulty envisaging much beyond what they know, and this is potentially a severe practical constraint on the thinking of employment alternatives by the plateaued individual. It is likely that this situation can be exacerbated by negative perceptions of others and group think leading to loss of self-confidence.

Bardwick (1986) considered that it was usually easier for the individual to escape content plateau by adopting job altering strategies rather than seeking to change the structure of the organisation. This would seem to be correct, as job content is much more under the control of the individual, and the political implications of endeavouring to change the organisation structure may well be insurmountable. Successful intervention by the individual into content plateauing should, logically, impact positively on broader life plateauing.

Rantze and Feller (1985) described four strategies adopted by plateaued workers to deal with their situation. In following the ‘Placid’ approach, the plateaued worker accepted the situation and sought to mask their anger and frustration. In the ‘Hopscotch’ strategy, the worker remained with the same organisation and sought new opportunities through lateral moves, activating old friendships and networks. The ‘Change of Uniform’ strategy involved leaving the organisation, seeking a fresh start in a similar position in a new organisation. The ‘Entrepreneurial’ approach led to self-employment.

Rantze and Feller (1985, pp. 25-26) recommended the entrepreneurial approach as the most productive, as it forced a creative response from the employee to their circumstance, and it changed the locus of control from the employer to the employee. In practical terms, these employees moved from an under empowered ‘Why not me?’ to a more empowered ‘How can I?’ mindset. Ivancevich and DeFrank (1990, p. 19)
recommended career counselling, stress management workshops, time management, relaxation techniques and health-related workshops to assist plateaued employees.

Scholars including Van Maanen (1978) and Feldman (1989) suggested sound performance evaluation systems and associated feedback as solutions to problems linked to career plateaus. Leibowitz, Kaye and Farren (1990) believed that organisations should move away from promotion-based rewards and eliminate ‘unnecessary layers of management’. These were actions which these scholars believed could provide employees with more respect, autonomy and challenge. Team-based work is one consequence of flatter organisation structures and is widely attributed with the capacity to allow the creation of a workplace environment that provides respect, autonomy and new learning. However, this researcher has found that the creation of such an environment can be resisted by powerful people in the hierarchy, who may perceive teams as a threat or challenge to their own power. The researcher has also witnessed management positions and layers having been removed, but subsequently being re-installed in response to output or quality problems ascribed to the new way of working. The conclusion is that although the Leibowitz et al. suggestions may be sound, they may be difficult to implement and sustain.

At a micro level, Montgomery (2002) sought to keep her own job constantly interesting in order to better deal with the challenges she confronted in her mid years. Montgomery sought to achieve this by expanding her role through inventing new tasks and new challenges.

At an organisational level, Montgomery (2002) recommend the following strategies. Plateauing needed to be regarded as an organisation-wide problem otherwise, ‘the more individuals feel they own the problem and have to fix it alone, the less likely it will be resolved’ (DeLon, 1993). Staff should be provided with education about the three types of plateauing. Montgomery recommended that information should relate to the ‘relationship between identity, work, self-esteem, and ageing; the appropriate role of work in life and how that changes over time; the interaction between work and personal life; and retirement and second careers’. Montgomery further recommended that, after awareness was raised, managers should talk with their staff, asking questions to stimulate thinking rather than giving prescriptive answers. In preparation for this
discussion, Montgomery recommended that managers reflect on how plateauing was impacting on them personally. Employment policies should be established to reduce the emphasis on traditional rewards, such as promotions, and should be replaced by emphasis on alternatives, such as conference attendance, public praise, and opportunities to lead a task force. With regard to feedback during performance reviews, Bardwick suggested ‘lots of praise and only a little criticism’ (Bardwick, 1986, p. 156).

At the level of the individual, Montgomery saw the escape from career plateau as a journey of self-discovery involving the following steps. Individuals considering switching jobs within a profession needed to remember the ‘ninety-nine percent rule’: job switching was likely merely to delay the inevitable plateau – and lead merely to performing the old work in a new setting. Anyone planning to switch careers needed to analyse their skills, interests, experience and motivation for making the change and, if staying, they should reflect on past satisfiers or on what the individual had always wanted to do. Following this reflection, the conclusion might be that the time had come to embark on these interests. In this case, goals, values and habits should be examined. There needed to be discussion with one’s team, and the individual needed to take a controlling role in any change. Continuous learning needed to be embraced as a strategy, and conscious efforts directed at activities beyond work as a means of maintaining self-esteem. Work might not be going well, but this could be counterbalanced by success in other endeavours. It was also suggested by Montgomery that relationships with family and friends become a priority. Montgomery emphasised the need to avoid allowing yourself to be defined by one role, such as work, ‘if you balance your commitments to persons and activities outside of the job and remain open to change and growth, you will likely have few problems with life plateauing’ (Montgomery, 2002).

3.3.9 A study of the careers of younger workers

3.3.9.1 Overview

It is clear from the foregoing that career plateauing is multi-faceted and has links to productivity, although the linkage does not appear to have been quantified in career plateau research. A supplementary study to complement the research for this thesis was commissioned by this researcher into the working experiences of younger workers.
It confirmed that plateaus could be experienced in the early stages of a career as well the later stages.

During 2003, the researcher commissioned IBM Business Consulting Services to study younger workers, below thirty years of age. These workers were in the early stages of their careers. The objective of the study was to gain insight into intergenerational similarities and differences, and to identify potential issues that could arise from an extended working life by older workers. IBM adopted the story-telling methodology for their study, and this approach led to a large collection of anecdotal observations. The following are quotations from the transcripts of small group discussions. The transcripts supported an internal report to Australia Post (Callahan & Poynton, 2003). Although the following quotations have been edited to remove superfluous verbiage, the spirit and intent has not been altered.

This material is included in the literature review as the younger worker study formed part of the background to the case study analysis reported in Chapter 6. Further, its inclusion in the literature review enables this information to be compared and reviewed against the case study findings related to older workers. The inclusion of research into the working life of younger workers demonstrated that there were similarities between the work experience of workers at both ends of the working life; and that the experience of work is stressful. The words in bold type highlight the important aspects of the work experience of these younger workers.

3.3.9.2  Job stress and bad management

‘I work in a call centre environment, it’s really hard.’

‘Sometimes you feel like you’re doing as much as you can, but you are constantly being pushed and told that it’s not good enough.’

‘At the moment I think we’re feeling like we are being guarded, like we are not adults and that we can’t do our job on our own, that we need to be told all the time.’
'If you disappear from your desk for ten minutes to go and see someone - you get asked, “Where have you been?” You can’t sit at your desk and be on the phones for the whole eight hours of the day. You need to walk around and see people.’

‘Instead of approaching a person, in particular, they let the whole team know via an e-mail.’

‘Every time I try to approach one of my managers for work – life balance and I get rejected – this is the fifth time. My manager said there is nothing we can talk about, there is nothing you can do about it.’

‘Nothing is really appreciated.’

‘It gets really disheartening, particularly when you don't get a lot of feedback.’

‘I had to attend motivational courses after I started this job.’

Now as I drive to work I scream and shout, I’vegot to get everything out – by the time I get to work I am smiling.’

3.3.9.3   Desirable job features

‘That’s what I like about processing, the processing is more flexible, you can actually have, I suppose, a fairly diverse and exciting day.’

‘I think one good thing is that I work in a team. When your team members are willing to come to you for advice you are able to prove to the team management that you are capable at your work. If you have been able to complete something successfully, they give you more opportunity do something else, something a little bit harder, more challenging.’

‘No one is listening. People who have expressed themselves in the past – managers tend to hold that against you.’
3.3.9.4  Lack of career development: career plateau

‘It’s really, really difficult to get an internal job – I have actually stopped applying internally for about two years.’

‘I think that flexibility is becoming too much of a safety net for me because I’m more of a risk-taker – I don’t know, it’s very safe and, I mean safe, but it’s more like a job for life. I see people who have been here for fourteen years and I thought – Oh, I don’t really want to be like him or her in fourteen years time. I want to go back to a private firm, public multinationals, where changes happen every day.’

‘It’s okay -- it would be okay to be here for fourteen years if you are able to have a variety of roles. To be here for fourteen years in the one job. I think that people under thirty or people of that generation, I don’t want to be in the same job for fourteen years – it’s not that they don’t want to be with the company.’

‘It seems to me that a lot of the higher roles are taken by people who have been here longer. More opportunities are given to people who have been here longer.’

‘It’s not fair - I mean, the people who have been here longer might be more familiar with the job and can know how to do it with their eyes closed, but they might not have the people skills – it’s not fair to us young people that happen to have studied. We don’t know the job like the back of our hand, but training is what makes you learn a job.’

‘Look, I don’t know what your expectation was of us, but simply you’re not what we expected at all.’

‘I went for a job interview, about six months ago. I said, I’d really like to get together for some feedback, she said yes no worries, I will send you an e-mail with some times. I never heard back from her, I sent her a further e-mail asking “What’s happening?” - I never heard back from her.’
‘Everything I learned that University doesn’t apply, common sense doesn’t apply. I got an interview, but I failed and the manager was really glad, and said to me, “Well, you’re not really qualified, because we’re looking for someone who has been at Australia Post for three years and you have been here for just eight months.” I said “So why did you give me an interview?” He says, “We thought we will just give you an interview because you are Australia Post personnel and we can’t recruit someone externally unless we can reject you”.

‘I have seen the quality of my work drop-off. I don’t know what I’m doing a lot of the time and my emotions have become really unbalanced because a lot of AO7 and AO8 people just sit around reading the newspaper, drinking coffee whilst I’m working fifty hours straight work, even skipping lunch time.’

‘It was very difficult because I think, for the first eight months, - “I am just an invisible programmer.” You see your name mentioned on some e-mails but no one knows what you look like – I felt like I got stuck in a shell. I was told my working hours were seven hours twenty-one minutes per day but the people working around you, their work ethic was absolutely amazing, about 50 hours a week plus, with families and study and other commitments. I started to work later and later and later, as well. There was one thing though – everyone in my unit at the time was classified AO7 or AO8; in a different world to where I was at level A3, as well as in a different benefit level.’

‘I am on higher duties and it gets extended every five weeks. I am constantly concerned that I am going to go back from an AO5 to an AO3. They say “You’ll be okay, we will probably extend you.” But my career is in their hands.’

‘It can be stifling in Shared Services because there’s not a lot of opportunity to move on, only to the same level. Shared Services consists mainly of AO3 operators and then it’s AO5 and AO6. There are no middle steps – not much career hope for the general processing operator – nowhere for the AO3 to go. I would like to develop my career. I know other people who have become complacent, to a certain extent, and stay in their comfort zone, which is not necessarily a good thing for development.’
'I have to say that, after being here for two years and being told at my job interview that I would be given the opportunity to train and there would be career development – eighteen months later there has been no training offered and no career development. I've never had a conversation with my manager, about what skills are wanted and what I need improved as was promised at the interview – nothing has actually happened. There has been no training offered.'

‘I have found the reporting structure a little different coming from a really small company. I have got to go to my team leader who goes to the team co-ordinator, who has to go to his manager.’

Themes emanating from the above research suggest that that these younger workers feel a sense powerlessness to manage their futures. They seek career progression through promotion, mobility. They wish to learn and to occupy jobs with broad job scope, variety and challenge. They seek an inclusive, participatory management style rather than one that is authoritarian.

3.3.10 Conclusion

Chapter 3 has presented two competing realities. The exuberant, unpredictable and somewhat boundaryless environment of today’s global business, on the one hand, and the more mundane and controlled or bounded world of the plateaued older worker. Chapter 3 documented a potential disparity and tension between the global business needs of its workforce, and suggested that there might be a lack of readiness of a plateaued older workforce to satisfy those global business needs. There were signs that workers, regardless of age, might be insufficiently prepared for the unpredictability inherent in global business.

This research also suggested a potential need for business to institute a comprehensive set of interventions across the entire organisation; interventions that embrace management style and organisational systems, including leadership development, job design, learning and skill maintenance and career planning. The need for these interventions does not appear limited to older workers; rather, all workers would benefit.
A review of the work experiences of young workers enables a comparison between their experiences and those of the older workers who participated in the case studies for this thesis. This comparison will show that there are similarities between the work experience of workers at both ends of the working life; and that the experience of work is stressful. The quotations of the younger workers add support to the career theory that has emerged from this chapter that enriched jobs, career development and initiatives directed at workplace motivation are important to both young and older worker age cohorts. Human weakness leading to poor management practice is impossible to eliminate. This suggests that individuals should assume responsibility for the management of their careers, rather than hoping that management will satisfy their individual needs.

Having suggested, in Chapter 3, that the evolving needs of business may not currently align with the state of preparedness of workers to meet those needs, Chapter 4 reviews the literature on the ‘boundaryless career’, which is thought by some researchers to represent the needs of the twenty-first-century global business.
4

Literature Review: The Boundaryless Career

4.1 Overview

The context literature in Chapter 3 considered the nature of business at the commencement of the twenty-first century, and the experience of plateaued workers as seen through an examination of the career plateau literature. The chapter concluded with a brief view of work experience as described by some young workers. The conclusion was that the labour needs of the twenty-first-century global organisation might not be aligned with worker aspirations and with the state of worker readiness.

The primary focus of Chapter 4 is the boundaryless career. This is a career construct developed by some researchers who sought to link careers to perceived needs and behaviours of the twenty-first-century organisation. It is a developing body of knowledge where much remains in contention. The discussion on boundaryless careers is introduced through a brief discussion on career success criteria, followed by an analysis of the more traditional career theory. The boundaryless career discussion follows; it examines the nature of boundaryless careers, their consequences and perceived benefits, shortcomings and issues of academic contention.

Although the literature on careers generally, and the so-called boundaryless career, in particular, will be seen to be unsatisfactory in many respects, the most important benefit in this analysis of the boundaryless career lies in the possibilities it provides for seeing into the future. The construct provides a stark contrast between the boundaryless
career and the traditional career. Put another way, it would be difficult to envisage the future by merely examining the careers that fall within the middle of the current standard curve of careers. By comparing the middle of the normal curve, the traditional career, with the outlier boundaryless career, it may be possible to gain insight into the future and perhaps identify actions that organisations and workers can take to protect their interests.

4.2 What is ‘career success’?

An established definition of ‘career’ is ‘the unfolding sequence of a person’s work experiences over time’ (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence, 1989, in Arthur et al., 2005). In past times, a career typically involved a person working in one or two firms and progressing vertically, and in a linear fashion.

According to Arthur, Khapova and Wilderom (2005), careers could be described in two fundamentally different ways: ‘Subjective careers’ which reflected the individual’s view of their own career, and ‘objective careers’ which were the publicly observable career situation, organisational position and status. Arthur, Khapova and Wilderom conducted a review of journal articles that dealt with career success and were published in established journals between 1992 and 2004. In addition to searching the term ‘career success’, they searched for articles that used the terms ‘career outcomes’, ‘career advancement’, ‘career satisfaction’ and ‘managerial advancement’. This review produced eighty articles of which sixty-eight were judged suitable for analysis. These scholars concluded that most works defined career success as ‘desirable work-related outcomes at a given point in a person’s unfolding career’. They reported that fifty-three journal articles (78%) dealt primarily with ‘subjective careers’, which they concluded was a construct that exists only in people's minds. Sixty-one journal articles (90%) included reference to ‘objective careers’, reflecting success through advancement along a hierarchy of power and prestige. Ten journal articles (15%) had a focus only on ‘subjective career’ success, nineteen journal articles (28%) focused only on ‘objective career’ success. The combination of these emphases was seen as potentially the best way of measuring career success and it demonstrated that traditional measures of success involving hierarchy, power and prestige remained important to researchers and, most likely, to the subjects of their research.
Table 4.1 provides a summary of the criteria of objective and subjective career factors used by the authors of the sixty-eight journal articles referred to above to define career success. They are presented to demonstrate the relative narrowness of the determinants of objective career success factors and its strong emphasis on hierarchical promotion. The factors also suggest that this narrowness may be unsatisfactory for classifying the needs of older workers as it is possible that older workers may be working mainly to satisfy subjective factors, or possibly a combination of both subjective or objective factors. Having already achieved their work goals, older workers might now be more interested in pursuing portfolio lives where the desire for power and financial reward no longer has the significance it once had.

Table 4.1: Career success: criteria, objective and subjective factors used to evaluate success by various careers scholars

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Objective career factors</th>
<th>Subjective career factors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career outcomes</td>
<td>Financial outcomes</td>
<td>Career satisfaction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career satisfaction</td>
<td>Career advancement</td>
<td>Advancement satisfaction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Managerial advancement</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Career management outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career success</td>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Knowledge and skill outcomes – opportunities for personal growth, curiosity</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Career outcomes</td>
<td>Salary</td>
<td>Perceived career success</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career path</td>
<td>Politician type</td>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early career success</td>
<td>Span of control</td>
<td>Social support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career advancement</td>
<td>Managerial promotions</td>
<td>Perceived career plateau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career optimism</td>
<td>Years supervising others</td>
<td>Perceived hierarchy or success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective career success</td>
<td>Less time without promotion</td>
<td>Future prospects satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work outcomes</td>
<td>Hierarchical level</td>
<td>Occupational commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived career success</td>
<td>Performance rating</td>
<td>Organisational commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career effectiveness</td>
<td>Career progression: promotion rate</td>
<td>Satisfaction with compensation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career planning</td>
<td>Number of subordinates</td>
<td>Identity resolution, in emotion, self-concept</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A brief review of the literature describing careers, as they used to be, provides an understanding of the foundations upon which the boundaryless career is evolving. It is important to point out that some disquiet about career theory has been noted, in that a number of researchers have pointed to flaws in the seminal thinking about traditional careers. It will be shown that disquiet also exists about the efficacy of the boundaryless career construct.

With regard to the traditional views of careers, the principle concerns relate to the generalisation of research findings that were based on the study of male careers to
females. That is, much of the research into traditional careers focused solely on male careers and neglected the possibility that women's careers could be very different. Further, most of the contemporary careers research continues to relate to careers completed within a small number of organisations, and in domestic rather than international organisations. This criticism, by other scholars, has had a cautionary effect on this researcher’s acceptance of the validity and quality of the body of knowledge as it applies to careers generally.

4.3 Traditional careers

4.3.1 Objectiveness theory: employment stability and linear progression

Sullivan (1999) reported that the traditional career model had dominated and continued to dominate the empirical research on careers. In a review of fifty-eight articles in five journals that was undertaken by Arthur and Rousseau (1996), 74% of the articles on careers were found to have assumed environmental stability, 76% had an intra-firm focus and 81% followed hierarchical assumptions. This was despite environmental changes and changes to organisation structures that had been driven by increasingly dynamic marketplace changes (see Chapter 3). These changes meant that organisations that were once characterised by multi-layers within silos of related functions, came to possess fewer organisational layers and more flexible arrangements than would have been possible with the static silo structures. Consequences of the flattening of organisational hierarchies, which have included workforce downsizing, increased job responsibilities, longer working hours and reduced promotional opportunities, have not been well researched (Sullivan, 1999).

Banai and Harry (2004) contended that there were two broad groups of theories that categorised career development. These categories had been developed by Savickas in response to cultural changes seen to be occurring within careers. Savickas (2000) developed the terms ‘objectivist’ to describe established career theory and ‘constructivist’ to describe the emerging theory which broadly relates to careers emanating from the global organisation. The ‘objectivist’ theories focused on the traditional, linear and rational methodology for defining knowledge (Peterson & Gonzales, 2000; Savickas 1995, 2000; Zunker, 2002). Theories embraced by the
The objectivist term included the established career theories of personality type, theory of work adjustment, lifespan and life space theory, the theory of circumscription and social learning theory; that is, bounded careers (Banai & Harry, 2004).

Banai and Harry argued that both objectivist and constructivist theories had developed to describe and explain domestic rather than international career management. These theories had assumed that an individual career was locked into one or very few organisations.

### 4.3.2 Pay, promotion and status in exchange for loyalty and organisation-specific skills

Individuals have traditionally endeavoured to satisfy their career goals by accommodating organisational objectives and processes. This approach resulted in workers being rewarded in pay, promotion and status, dependent on their loyalty to the organisation. These incentives tended to inhibit workers from relocating their careers to other employers.

Banai and Harry postulated that over time, loyalty to the employer led workers to develop skills that were organisation specific. Knowledge and skill refreshment came through negotiation with the employer, and negotiations centered on sponsorship for formal training programs, both on and off the job. As a logical consequence of these mutually re-enforcing practices, workers tended to develop their careers in one or two organisations where career success was measured by comparing progress with others in terms of their relative age and seniority (Sullivan, 1999).

### 4.3.3 Careers based on life stage experiences and expectations

Research about traditional careers has been ‘greatly influenced by theories of adult development’ (Sullivan, 1999). Two prominent theories related to careers and adult development are those developed by Donald Super, first published in 1957, and by Daniel Levinson, who first published his theories in 1978 (Sullivan, 1999).
Super’s theory of ‘career stages’ was based on a life span approach which described how individuals saw themselves through vocational choices. Super argued that this view of themselves developed over time and could be summarised, or categorised, as occurring in four career stages. Stage one involved exploration, and this occurred during schooling when different career options were considered and reflected upon. Stage two happened when the career was in the early stages of establishment; this stage began when an individual was first employed. Stage three involved maintenance and consolidation; a time when the individual held onto their position and updated skills. Stage four involved preparation for disengagement from the workforce. Stage four was frequently described as a period of ‘phasing into retirement’.

Super subsequently updated his career theory by noting that there were individual differences in the extent of commitment and participation an employee devoted to six major roles – as child, student, person of leisure, citizen, worker and homemaker – across their career stages. Super acknowledged that people pursued these multiple roles simultaneously and that this created various levels of role conflict and stress for the worker. Super was reported in Sullivan (1999) as concluding that people might limit the roles they undertook simultaneously to two or three.

4.3.4 Careers based on values, goals and activities associated with chronological age

Levinson provided a contrast to Super’s ‘career stages’ approach. Levinson considered that careers were based on each individual’s life, as a whole, and on chronological age (Levinson, 1978). According to Levinson, relevant chronological age periods were defined by alternating periods of stability, in which individuals pursued goals, values and related activities. Subsequent stages were informed by a reappraisal of those goals and values and the determination of new goals and values. Interestingly, it appears that Levinson developed his model following in-depth interviews with a sample of forty males and generalised those findings to include women. On this basis, Sullivan (1999) argued that Levinson’s research is flawed, because Sullivan considered female careers to be very different to those of men.
According to Levinson, career stages typically lasted about five years before the period of stability within the career stage became more turbulent as the individual reappraised the appropriateness of their existing goals, values and related activities. The periods of stability enabled the individual to focus on non-work related-issues, and renewal through the development of their work skills, and the mental preparation for transitions. It is interesting that this five-year time horizon broadly equates with the three-and-a-half to five-year time frame for the onset of job content plateauing which is discussed in Chapter 3. Bejian and Salomone (1995) proposed that Levinson’s process of career renewal was accompanied by a ‘period of doubt and self-examination that could be followed by a renewed commitment to career issues’.

It seems that career renewal seen in the light of Super’s and Levinson’s models may present particular difficulty for older workers who may believe that their career options are narrowing because of their age. When this perception is matched with the reality that their career options are in fact contracting, the older worker wishing to continue working in a stimulating role may have little choice other than to undertake a voluntary transition into what to them is a non-traditional career compared to the career path they had pursued. But first, they would have to make the mental transition from a mindset of retirement. This scenario provides support for Sullivan’s recommendation that more research be conducted into the recycling and renewal process, as she considered that further research could lead to greater understanding of the choices that individuals made in undertaking voluntary transitions from traditional to non-traditional careers.

### 4.3.5 Critique of Super’s and Levinson’s career theory

Sullivan was critical of Levinson’s theory, arguing that it was based on limited empirical research, and because the research that had been undertaken did not, in Sullivan’s view, support the link between specific age groups and attitudes as Levinson has suggested. This criticism was in addition to Sullivan’s concerns about generalising male research findings to females.

Concerning the generalisation of Super’s and Levinson’s models to women, authors quoted by Sullivan referred to workplace discrimination, pay and promotion inequities, greater family demands, and sexual harassment as distinguishing issues which
suggested that women's careers could not be adequately explained by career stage models developed following a study of male subjects. Sullivan found that there had been only four major published studies testing the generalisability of these models to women. One of the studies had been conducted by Levinson himself, in which he reported that women did in fact progress through the same age-related stages as men, but he conceded that women did face cultural, social stereotypes and sexism at work. A second study, by Roberts and Newton (1987), reported that women did progress through similar periods of stability and transitions as men but that women tended to have ‘split dreams’ – meaning that by age thirty, women changed their focus from a career to family or vice versa. A third study, by Ornstein and Isabella (1993), which replicated an earlier study that had focused on men, found little support for the applicability of either Levinson or Super’s models to women. Similarly, Smart and Peterson (1994) in the fourth study found little support for Levinson's model. Based on these four studies, Sullivan concluded that neither Super nor Levinson adequately dealt with the complexity of female lives as they impacted careers.

The research on female careers, according to Sullivan, suggested that different career timetables applied for women and men and that career achievements by certain ages did not adequately describe the careers of many women. It is not surprising that Sullivan also queried the validity of the models developed by Super and Levinson in terms of relevance to the changed work environments that flowed from globalisation and other stimuli. In contrast to the above gender-based differences, Lynn, Cao and Horn (1996) found some similarities between the genders. Using a sample of 718 men and women, these researchers found that job involvement, organisational commitment and reward satisfaction were positively related to professional tenure and that there were no significant differences between men and women.

In a study of careers of postgraduate, work-experienced subjects, Ackah and Heaton (2004) acknowledged the potential age-related limitations that could apply to the general application of their preliminary findings on the differences that gender, occupational groupings and educational status contributed to careers. These researchers pointed out that the relative youth of their subjects meant that the attitudes and experiences of their respondents might not reflect those of older age groups. Nevertheless, these researchers reported a growing similarity between male and female
careers, noting however that there were very different perceptions of factors that influenced career paths and career progression. They reported that many of the issues were complex and contradictory.

Despite shortcomings, at an intuitive level, the Super and Levinson career models do seem to explain many traditional careers which encapsulated job security in exchange for loyalty, linear progression and organisation-specific skills. However, the models were developed before many of the fundamental changes to organisations that have been described in Chapter 3 occurred.

4.4 Twenty-first-century boundaryless careers

4.4.1 Overview

Some researchers described the impact of globalisation on careers as ‘dramatic’ (Sullivan, 1999). As a consequence of this view, this thesis concentrates on the boundaryless career because of its apparent conceptual simplicity, its perceived relationship to the boundaryless global organisation, its juxtaposition as a polar opposite to the traditional bounded career and its predominance, according to some researchers such as Rousseau (1995), as a new form of career.

Unfortunately, in common with the traditional objectiveness school of thinking, the more recent constructiveness theories which embrace the boundaryless career have tended to describe, explain and predict domestic rather than international career management. A further potential problem is that constructiveness theorists assume that an individual’s career has been fixed into the service of one, or very few organisations (Banai & Harry, 2004). Both of these assumptions are inconsistent with the anecdotal evidence of multiple employers within a global setting. Banai and Harry contended that workers who had been employed in a small number of organisations, and with a domestic focus, had to try to achieve their career goals by accommodating organisational objectives and processes. A consequence of these accommodations would seem to be that these particular cohorts of workers have not been prepared for boundaryless careers; these workers might, therefore, be left with a narrow choice of alternative career options, and such a scenario would seem to be particularly likely in respect of older workers, given that their careers have typically followed traditional
patterns. In summary, this narrow career background would not seem to be supportive of developing the skills, attitudes and behaviours needed for effectiveness in vibrant and chaotic global organisations.

It is clear that work and organisational circumstances have changed markedly since the 1980s, with a variety of studies supporting the proposition that the nature of the employment relationship is changing in ways that place less value on stability and greater value on workforce flexibility (Banai & Harry 2004; Sullivan, 1999; Van Buren, 2003).

Chapter 3 outlined fundamental changes to the structure of organisations and workforces that have been precipitated by enabling communication technologies and the consequential global business possibilities presented to organisations. These changes have resulted in organisational restructuring, workforce downsizing, reorganising and outsourcing. Some researchers have recorded that these stimuli have increased involuntary turnover and inter-company movements which, in turn, have eroded the psychological contract that traditionally existed between workers and their employing organisation, and put in its place a transactional contract (Rousseau, 1995).

Changes brought about by these management interventions have been found to diminish the traditional bonds and loyalty of workers to employers, and have increased worker cynicism as workers have been forced to exchange traditional job security for an organisational environment that says that it values personal performance, continuous learning and marketability above loyalty (Sullivan, 1999). In a book review comprised of chapters contributed by noted career scholars, Crocitto (1998) observed an overriding impression that the traditional, predictable and hierarchical career was being replaced by a boundaryless career; a career that is managed by individuals rather than organisations, a ‘multifaceted phenomenon involving navigation across employers, market confirmation, one’s knowledge and choices, and connections to networks of a social and professional nature’.
4.4.2 Definitions of a boundaryless career

Researchers including Arthur and Rousseau (1996) and Osterman (1996) have reported that workers outside the traditional career model, whose careers now tend to embrace multiple firms and boundaries, are pursuing professional and entrepreneurial, boundaryless careers.

The term, ‘boundaryless’, was first used by Arthur (1994) to distinguish between traditional careers and what he observed as less orderly employment through the shift from full-time to part-time work, the increased engagement of professional people on fixed-term transactional contracts, and the growth of horizontal rather than hierarchical career movement. Arthur and Rousseau (1996, p. 6) describe the boundaryless career as being the opposite of the traditional organisational career. By 1996, Arthur and Rousseau were arguing that the boundaryless career had become the norm rather than the exception; it had become the predominant career.

According to de Janasz et al. (2003), the change to the boundaryless career embraces a move from traditional long-term loyalty to an organisation, wherein competencies are built according to organisational needs, to a model of occupational excellence where the competencies are generic rather than organisation specific. This represents a case of occupational excellence, in which each form of knowledge and the accumulation of competencies reflect changes in the organisational environment, employment, and personal factors and are independent of a single firm.

Arthur and Rousseau explained the boundaryless career construct by ascribing a variety of meanings to the term. The common feature of the different approaches was that the individual considered themselves not to be reliant on the organisation for career opportunities. In the view of Arthur and Rousseau, a boundaryless career could involve movement across the boundaries of separate employers. Boundary hopping is seen to occur when a discipline expert, such an academic or a carpenter, is validated in the market place by forces other than the employer. This could occur when hierarchy or reporting and advancement principles and traditional organisational career boundaries were broken, as in the case of a networked person such as a real estate agent, or someone sustained by networks or information. A boundaryless career could develop
when a person rejected existing career opportunities for personal or family reasons; or when an individual perceived a boundaryless future, regardless of structural constraints. A boundaryless career ‘may involve sequences of job opportunities that go beyond the boundaries of single employment settings’ (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996).

Boundaryless work includes telecommuting, which involves completing a substantial amount of work from a home office, or flexible work scheduling, and project work. De Janasz (2003) reported that the Ceridian Group had estimated that 90% of businesses use boundaryless work arrangements. The International Telework Association and Council reported that almost twenty million workers telecommuted in 1999, and the respected Gartner Group has estimated that this would increase to 137 million people in 2003 (de Janasz, 2003).

In concluding that the most common boundaryless career is characterised by a career identity independent of the employer, Defillippi and Arthur (1996) provided the example of a software engineer who remained marketable through the accumulation of employment experiences, acquisition of flexible knowledge and the development of networks of personal influence, all of which were independent of the employing organisation.

The example of the software engineer does not appear, to this researcher, to be different to the traditional self-employed plumber, electrician, medical practitioner or any number of self-employed professional people, who could be seen to have traditionally operated in the same manner as the example. Another interesting contradiction concerns women conducting a small business. In this regard, Brush (1992) argued that women who operated small businesses did not view their businesses as separate economic units, as do men, but instead, these women perceived the business as part of an interconnected system of relationships that included family and the community. According to Brush, women business owners, as opposed to male owners, placed an emphasis on flexibility, team management, knowledge growth and the simultaneous management of work and non-work demands. Brush contended that these characteristics had also been associated with the boundaryless career construct.
Given the above, it is possible that the boundaryless career may not represent a radical change to many careers, but may merely signal an increase in the numbers of people pursuing boundaryless type work arrangements.

### 4.4.3 Differences to traditional careers

It can be seen that the boundaryless career construct relies on the contrast between traditional careers that involved mutual obligations between employer and worker and the assertion that today’s workers have careers that are characterised by a lack of mutual obligation. The new career is characterised by multiple employers, project work, flexibility and an ‘emphasis on learning rather than promotions and salary increases’ (Arthur & Rousseau in de Janasz, 2003). In this new career, workers change jobs, industries and even career disciplines as they seek to maintain or improve their standard of living while developing new, more marketable skills. Continuous knowledge acquisition is critical (de Janasz, 2003).

The following table, Table 4.2, developed by Sullivan (1999, p. 458) provides a summary of much of the literature on the boundaryless career. The table includes the features of traditional careers to provide a basis of comparison.

**Table 4.2: Comparison of traditional and boundaryless careers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment relationship</th>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Boundaryless</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Job security for loyalty</td>
<td>Employability for performance and flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundaries</td>
<td>One or two firms</td>
<td>Multiple firms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Firm specific</td>
<td>Transferable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measurements of success</td>
<td>Pay, promotion, status</td>
<td>Psychologically meaningful work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility for career management</td>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Formal programs</td>
<td>On the job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milestones</td>
<td>Age related</td>
<td>Learning related</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Sullivan (1999, p. 458).*
4.4.4 Important implications

4.4.4.1 Overview

It can be seen from the foregoing that features of the boundaryless career include portable skills, knowledge, and work that span multiple firms and boundaries. Other features are said to include personal identification with meaningful work, on-the-job action learning, and the development of multiple networks and peer learning relationships together with individual responsibility for career management.

The shift towards greater levels of individual responsibility can be witnessed in many other aspects of life today. Examples include the shift from defined benefit superannuation schemes to defined contribution schemes, which has the effect of relocating responsibility for superannuation management from employer to employee. Another example involves the consequences of broadly based organisational restructuring towards flatter organisation structures and the often concurrent reduction of support staff. This has resulted in individual workers performing many of their support functions themselves. Examples include typing services, photocopying and collating, research via electronic data bases – services once provided for them by support workers.

4.4.4.2 The demise of the ‘company man’

Despite employees generally having a preference for more stable employment relationships (Freeman & Rogers, 1999; Pfeffer, 1989), researchers supporting the boundaryless career construct report the phasing out of the ‘company man’ career. This appears a sensible conclusion, as a boundaryless career, as described above, is inconsistent with the display of loyalties implied by the ‘company man’ construct.

The ‘company man’s’ career has been typified by a clearly defined, linear career ladder with advancement. The traditional mutual loyalty by employee and employer has, according to many researchers, morphed into a career that is now without boundaries, ‘with individuals continually updating and remaking their skills and changing jobs on an average of every four and one-half years’ (Arthur, & Rousseau, in de Janasz et al., 2003; Eby, Butts & Lockwood, 2003). Subtle changes, such as the superannuation example provided above, support a trend that can be seen to move an organisation from
a paternalistic relationship with its workers to one where the organisation no longer displays parent-like behaviours, and the workers are forced to become self-sufficient. Complementary changes that support a broad societal level of self-sufficiency, and have been brought into the workplace, include the employer-driven move to voice-activated complaints handling and customer service facilities where the customer participates, through self-service, in the work of the organisation.

4.4.4.3 Less job tenure

Less job tenure would appear to be an obvious consequence of the boundaryless career. Consistent with that prediction, at the time of writing her journal article in 1999, Sullivan reported that most Americans changed jobs every four-and-one-half years. This is a situation that appears very different to the Australian scene as displayed in ABS job tenure statistics. The Australian statistics suggest much longer job tenure (See Figure 1.8, Chapter 1). The facts about job tenure are difficult to establish, and the subject is discussed in some detail in Section 4.4.7, which is devoted to contentious issues surrounding the boundaryless career.

Whilst job turnover is seen by some researchers to be increasing, employment levels and new job creation have apparently been declining in the United States, including in the large organisations which have traditionally been the main source of job growth. This combination of events would appear likely to stimulate some anxiety to boundaryless career workers. Further anxiety would seem to be exacerbated by environmental changes flowing from technological advances, global competition, emerging organisation structures and alterations in what some describe as the workplace psychological contract, which has led to employees becoming less dependent on the organisation than has traditionally been the case (Hall & Mervis, 1996). These scenarios have led a number of researchers, including Super himself, to suggest a potential need for revisions to the career theories of both Super and Levinson.

4.4.4.4 Faster learning cycles

Hall and Mirvis (1996) consider that current business realities dictate multiple and shorter learning cycles over a life span in lieu of the more stable learning patterns implicit in the broader career stages as depicted by Super (1957). According to Hall and
Mirvis, an individual’s career will inherently be a series of many stages of exploration involving trial, mastery and exit across functions, organisations and other work boundaries. Their view is that the new career cycles will be driven by constant learning and mastery rather than by chronological age. Sullivan (1999) argues that this approach integrates Super’s developmental career stage model with the boundaryless career construct and thereby begins to build a bridge between the two fundamentally different career theories.

4.4.4.5 Challenges to values and attitudes

The changes to organisations and business practices and their impacts on work that are described in Chapter 3 challenge the attitudes, values and beliefs of workers. Schein points out in an interview with Coutu (2002) Harvard Business Review that, ‘it is not a joyful process to give up your values and beliefs’. Nevertheless, financial pressures and the desire to remain employed can encourage accommodations.

The boundaryless career implies freedom, but changing traditional behaviours may not advance a person’s career within the organisation, and it has been seen that many people continue to have significant tenure within the one organisation. ‘If you wanted to stay at General Electric, you had to learn what Jack Welch wanted you to learn’ (Schein, 2002). Schein contended that much organisational learning had ‘disturbing parallels with brainwashing’. He wrote of ‘coercive persuasion’ – when people were in situations from which they could not physically escape and were pressured into adopting new beliefs. People with mortgages, school fees, etcetera and who were employed in a locality with poor alternative employment opportunities could identify with this scenario of seeking freedom but remaining bounded. Indeed organisations, according to Schein, used ‘golden handcuffs’ such as superannuation and other incentives to ‘socialise employees … so they would not, could not leave’.

In reviewing organisational initiatives taken over the years to increase quality of worklife, Beer (2002) reported that his recent work in a number organisations had resulted in conclusions that workers believed that they and their organisations were ‘overloaded and out of capacity’. Workers complained of too many initiatives coming from the top, pressures for high performance from top managers, who were ‘unleashing
program after program in their effort to adapt their organisations to perceived competitive threats’.

In undertaking a review of the sustainability of changes to work systems introduced ten years earlier at Corning manufacturing, and in other companies, Beer observed that few of the innovations remained in place. He attributed this to changes in business conditions, plant growth, and rotation of managers, all of which had ‘simply overwhelmed the innovative work system’. Beer regretted that changes to work systems did not create an underlying capacity of organisations that allowed managers and employees to maintain their values and principles and internalise the skills, attitudes and behaviours needed to adapt work systems to new circumstances. Rather, what organisations internalised were new systems of management (Beer, 2002). On the surface this appears a contradiction to worker freedom that some proponents of the boundaryless career attribute to that construct.

4.4.5 A mixed bag for workers

Bania and Harry (2004) listed ten advantages for the organisation when its workers adopted the boundaryless careers construct. These ten advantages, for the employer, dealt mainly with various cost efficiencies which could be achieved through the use of virtual team assignments, telecommuting and short, fixed-term and temporary employment contract arrangements. The employer could use these boundaryless people to alleviate skill deficiencies that existed within the organisation and which would be time consuming and expensive to resolve through building in-house expertise. This employment option could also provide an employer with the ability to undertake an unpopular initiative and attribute blame to the boundaryless worker.

Bania and Harry referred to one form of boundaryless career worker who has been described as the ‘international itinerant’. In the case of this worker, pay rates could reflect cheaper local conditions, and the itinerant would normally be responsible for their own career and family needs whilst working in an expatriate capacity.

From the worker’s perspective, the benefits would often accrue through favourable taxation treatments, the opportunity to work in exotic locations, together with higher
pay than might be available in their home country. Disadvantages for them would include the possibility of problems arising for themselves and their family without the benefit of the support systems in their home country; and potentially being not well received by the local population. The international itinerant employer could, apparently, sometimes avoid equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation in the host country by engaging an expatriate rather than a local (Banai & Harry).

The risks to the employer from hiring a boundaryless career person could come through a lack of knowledge of the skills and values of the itinerant and the possible problems arising from the itinerant’s lack of knowledge of, and respect for, local customs, business networks and business routines.

The emphases on cost saving and the social implications of a boundaryless career indicate that the boundaryless career will not suit everybody. Important personal characteristics, that this researcher has observed to be quite rare, would need to include a high tolerance of ambiguity and sufficient self-confidence to embrace a low level of job security.

At one extreme, globalisation represents the real world which places many individual workers in a powerless and periphery position where the worker is forced into a global market place without the necessary employment attributes for success. In a more positive light, the skilled worker, when seen through the lens of the so-called ‘war for talent’, is at the heart of the business, but the worker risks gradually forming a child-like dependency relationship with the employer, which has been seen from the previous chapter to ultimately result in career plateau. Although this child-like dependency on the organisation, with the organisation playing out the role of parent, is on the surface a foolish proposition, there is much evidence to suggest that organisational leadership will seek to manage their own and their workers’ anxiety in ways that tie the individual worker to their role. A third scenario presents an extreme to the powerless, unskilled worker. This scenario concerns the worker expert who is able to optimise their situation in a global market place on the basis of their rare and valuable skills.

These scenarios depict a continuum of situations ranging from powerlessness, through to mutual dependency and ultimate powerlessness, to the more powerful extreme of the
worker as a mercenary, or as a boundaryless career person. Consistent with these scenarios, Van Buren (2003) believed that not all people embarking on the boundaryless career were likely to be treated equally. He referred to two tiers of workers pursuing boundaryless careers. The first tier comprised people with rare and valuable skills. These people were largely able to demand and receive excellent treatment in their employment. The second tier, he pointed out, faced a more tenuous existence unless their skills were constantly upgraded. Van Buren asserted that second-tier workers would face greater competition for, and declining benefits from their employment. In contrast to the first-tier worker, they would experience downward pressures on salary and work conditions.

Rare and valuable skills are possessed by a small percentage of the population, suggesting that most workers pursuing a boundaryless career could expect to be worse off, according to Van Buren. He considered that the central issue concerned ‘who assumes the risk in the boundaryless employment relationship’. Van Buren concluded that, with the exception of the few possessing rare and valuable skills, the worker held the risks, including health and safety, career management, income maintenance, and responsibility for skill-maintenance. In the more traditional career there tended to be a mutuality of risk-sharing in these matters.

Interestingly, Defillippi and Arthur (1994) and Reich (1991) reported that widely acknowledged adverse personal health and welfare costs were experienced by boundaryless career participants and their families.

4.4.6 Competencies for a boundaryless career

Defillippi and Arthur (1994) made the point that an outcome from the new world of work was that ‘occupational or professional career investments can provide an attractive alternative to organisational dependency’. This appears a reasonable view, as there is no doubt that employability skills can provide critical bargaining power in the employment relationship.

There is a trend amongst supporters of the boundaryless career construct to accept three broad career competencies as important in predicting success. The terms frequently
used are ‘knowing why’, ‘knowing how’ and ‘knowing whom’ (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994; Eby, Butts & Lockwood, 2003; Jones & Lichtenstein, 2000; Parker & Arthur, 2000. ‘Knowing why’ competencies relate to the individual’s motivation, values and identification; there are obvious benefits when these align with the employing organisation. ‘Knowing how’ are the skills and knowledge to perform the work, whilst ‘knowing whom’ involves the network of people with power and influence.

Organisation-specific ways of doing things, sometimes referred to as routines, are an important aspect of required knowledge and need to be effectively addressed by the boundaryless worker (Nelson & Winter, 1982 in Defillippi & Arthur, 1994). The absence of knowledge of routines is arguably the prime determinant of the length of time taken by a skilled employee to become effective, and this transition time impacts engagement decisions by employers (Chandler, 2006b).

Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1984) provided another perspective on competencies for a boundaryless career. These researchers labeled occupational experts as ‘those who rely on intuitive grasp rather than formal rules, use analytical approaches to address novel situations, and maintain a vision of what is possible from their work performance’. It is interesting that these are skills widely acknowledged as being possessed by older workers (Chapter 1).

Learning support strategies that can be used to enable the development of boundaryless careers are said to be facilitated by the broad trend towards the adoption of occupational skill standardisation and accreditation, which can be seen to assist nurses and other health professionals (Kanter, 1989). These mechanisms can also be seen to exist in other fields, for example, their use by international accreditation systems for the degree of Master of Business Administration, and by membership of professional associations such as the Institute of Company Directors. Similarly, learning can be facilitated through the use of electronic libraries which provide global access to the latest research. Skill enhancement through on-the-job personal development can occur through team-based work systems, empowerment strategies, and total quality management systems which develop in workers broad managerial skills that used to be the province of managers and supervisors alone and that are attractive across a broad range of employer organisations (Defillippi & Arthur, 1994; Chandler, 2006).
The growth of occupational communities of interest - such as joint ventures, alliance partnerships between organisations, and technology parks – can provide other means of encouraging professional networking between organisations and workers, and this can assist the maintenance of skill currency (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984).

4.4.7 Contentious issues

4.4.7.1 Overview

Given the newness of the boundaryless career construct, it is not surprising that its validity and viability have been challenged by many scholars. For this researcher, a major unresolved issue remains the lack of serious debate on the potential consequences, such as worker anxiety, of a career without boundaries. In addition, this researcher has been unable to locate any substantial analysis of the impact of a boundaryless career on factors that are known to satisfy people at work (see Chapter 5).

4.4.7.2 Careers without boundaries

The Macquarie Dictionary definition of ‘boundary’ is instructive. It defines ‘boundary’ as ‘something that indicates bounds or limits; a limiting or bounding line’. It is difficult to conceptualise any area of life that is not bounded or constrained by rules of some sort. As a consequence, this researcher reflects on whether workers and their organisations have the ability to contain the potentially high levels of anxiety and chaos that can accompany a lack of boundaries. As a Board Member of an organisation catering for homeless youth, this researcher recalls the advice of social workers that one of the important differentiators applying to the chaos that often surrounds the life of homeless youth is a lack of boundaries in their lives. From an organisational perspective, there is a vast literature dedicated to the organisational need to align worker actions with organisational strategy and tactics. Examples of the literature include the works of Kaplan and Norton (2006) and De Wit and Meyer, (2004).

Boundaries have tended to be ‘central and ubiquitous in the social sciences, especially in areas such as the formation of individual, group or national identities, the creation of class, ethnic or gender inequalities, or the social construction of professions, knowledge and science’ (Loizos, 2004). Interestingly, Loizos has confirmed that his research enabled him to conclude that there has been ‘little serious and concerted study’ by
management scholars of the ‘formation, properties and consequences of boundaries per se as complex, shifting, socially constructed entities’.

King, Burke and Pemberton (2005) provided another perspective, arguing that it makes more sense to conceptualise careers as bounded than boundaryless as people are bounded by prior career history, occupational identity and by institutional constraints. Their argument was that earlier work experiences imposed constraints that served to influence later directions and that career opportunities were bounded in many ways. As reported in Chapter 3, behavioural psychology has produced much evidence to support this conclusion that there are severe limitations on the thinking and reasoning power of the human mind (Riddalls & Bennett, 2003).

Put another way, human cognitive limits in processing information constrain the range of possibilities for them as individuals, and these limits are reinforced by social influences and norms. The result is that people experience great difficulty in envisaging much beyond what they know, and this is a practical restraint on them conceptualising and acting on breakthrough ideas.

King et al. (2005) considered that the choice of ‘boundaryless’ to describe independence from a single organisation was unfortunate, ‘because the term has incorrectly been interpreted to mean liberation, freedom from constraints and because the use of the term has ‘provoked over emphasis on discontinuity with the past’.

Sullivan (1999, p. 477) is another researcher who called for greater clarity of terms and for further conceptualisation to fully investigate the new boundaryless career patterns. In common with others, Sullivan asserted that the term ‘boundaryless careers’ was a misnomer. Her argument was that systems need boundaries in order to define themselves and to separate themselves from the environment. As a consequence, in a real sense, Sullivan concluded that careers were not boundaryless. Sullivan identified that the literature on boundaryless careers had a primary focus on how boundaries had become more permeable, and further showed the boundaryless construct was still tied to the traditional organisational career perspective in that organisations, not individuals, had boundaries. Loizos (2004) held the view that whilst organisational boundaries might be breaking down to reveal dynamically changing new organisation structures,
that did not necessarily mean that they were disappearing or remaining un-replaced by some other more subtle form of boundary. Loizos was very critical of the current research effort and called for ‘actual field work rather than arm chair theorising in order to come to grips with complex, socially constructed and the shifting nature of boundaries’.

An example of the subtle form of boundary referred to by Loizos can be found in empirical research undertaken by King, Burke and Pemberton (2005). They studied information technology hiring decisions using the database of an employment consultancy. This study found that recruiters had control of access to opportunities and that candidates with relationships to the recruiter had greater possibilities of success. King et al. concluded that for these reasons, previous career decisions affected the probability of selection and that careers displayed a path dependency. As a consequence of this dependency, King et al. warned that even in a high turnover industry, high job turnover could have a negative effect on employer perceptions. Dany (2003) asserted that managers, as recruiters, imposed behavioural standards that resulted in them recruiting people who shared their views, because this made the managerial task easier. Managers were said to retain the authority to legitimise certain careers and damage others and there remained inequalities of power between employer and worker (Dany, 2003). Given that organisations have ‘multiple managers who act for themselves as principles and as agents for the organisation, the identification of rules remain but they become more complex’ (Rousseau, 1995).

Sullivan identified still other potential difficulties arising from the notion that the boundaryless career was becoming the norm. Her observation was that the research into careers tended to overlook potential contributions from fields such as anthropology and sociology. In addition, Sullivan observed that there were groups of workers who were invisible under the old career contract and she believed that they might well be just as invisible under the new. Whilst recognising that there had been an increase in the amount of research about the careers of women, older workers and temporary employees, Sullivan considered that there was still a lack of research on other disadvantaged groups. It comes as no surprise given the above concerns about career research that Sullivan called for greater research efforts into the dysfunctional aspects of
career, and presumably she included life outcomes associated with the pursuit of boundaryless careers.

4.4.7.3 Questionable job turnover data

There is also debate amongst scholars on whether or not globalisation and organisational restructuring have led to increases in job turnover – fundamental considerations for whether or not the boundaryless career has, in fact, become the dominant form of career. Previous paragraphs have reported that researchers such as Arthur and Rousseau have observed increased job instability. Others, such as Van Buren (2003), referred to recent studies that have found that, in aggregate, average job tenure has declined only modestly during the 1990s. An important point of complexity was that declines in job stability, which relates to the average length of tenure with a particular employer, have been found to have unequal impacts on different demographic groups. Black American workers, younger workers, and workers with high-school education or less have all suffered greater declines in job stability than other less disadvantaged cohorts (Aaronson & Sullivan, 1998). It seems that older workers, although often regarded as a disadvantaged group, have experienced even more modest declines in job tenure than the population average (Aaronson & Sullivan, 1998).

In Australia it has been noted by some researchers that employers are ‘investing heavily in retention strategies’ to keep quality staff. ‘A recent uptick in wages may be only half the story when it comes to attracting and retaining quality employees in an extremely tight labour market’ (Symonds, 2006). The Director of the Melbourne Institute at the University of Melbourne, for example, has reported that job tenure patterns are ‘consistent with workplace patterns stretching back decades’. Further, the Director of the Melbourne Institute found that ‘there is a group of people who turn over quite regularly, but another big group who hang on for more than ten years’ (Symonds, 2006). This situation has been found to exist in France where a representative sample of 3,000 professionals had been employed by an average of 1.2 firms and 46% had been with their current employer for more than ten years (Dany, 2003).

The behaviour of different cohorts of workers may explain different scenarios that have been presented by some other researchers. For example, some researchers have
reported that USA workers typically experienced ten employers over their adult lives (Topel & Ward, 1992); and that Japanese male workers experienced six employers on average (Cheng, 1991). Lee and Maurer (1997) argued that traditional turnover theories that focus on job satisfaction did not apply to the careers of a growing segment of the workforce – knowledge workers such as computer sciences engineers. According to Lee and Maurer, knowledge workers tended to leave organisations to pursue action plans that they had previously developed, or as a reaction to an abhorrent event, or to take on attractive alternatives as well as being dissatisfied with their existing workplace.

Guest (2004) has noted that employment flexibility takes many forms. His research into the use of flexible employment contracts led him to conclude that ‘alarmist press reports about the end of traditional employment and the proliferation of temporary and insecure jobs have proved wide of the mark’. This view is supported by other researchers including Dany (2003), who claimed that the ‘changes to careers are less radical than they seem’. Labour economists Aaronson and Sullivan (1998) reported that they had often been skeptical of widespread claims of declines in job stability and security. Aaronson and Sullivan reported that many economists had queried media accounts of changes in labour turnover rates, which they argued were anecdotal rather than evidence-based. A substantial USA-based study conducted by Aaronson and Sullivan involved a review of the economics literature and a study on displacement for high-tenure workers using the US Bureau of Labor Statistics Displaced Worker Surveys together with worker perspectives of their job security as encapsulated in the National Opinion Research Centre’s General Social Survey. Additionally these researchers related their measures of displacement and worker anxiety to wage growth by examining time-series data for the nine US Census Divisions. This body of data enabled them to conclude that, during the 1990s there had been ‘a modest decline in job stability and a larger decline in job security. Aaronson and Sullivan considered that some of the observed increases in worker displacement had been offset by declines in quit rates. Again, this trend was similar to the Australian norm. The ABS statistics of job tenure (Chapter 1, Figure 1.8) presented a different picture to the USA and Japanese experience of multiple employers discussed in earlier pages of this chapter.

It is likely that a tight labour market encourages employers and workers to review their retention strategies and slow the trend towards boundaryless careers (Dany, 2003).
From an employer perspective, labour hiring costs that approximate 50% of base salary, coupled with a lead-up time for effectiveness can provide good reasons for endeavoring to retain their core employees. As Chandler (2006b) pointed out, even short-term contractors can be quite expensive to recruit, as their recruitment costs comprise approximately 20% of base salary. Chandler said that he had not discerned an increase in churn rates of core employees in recent years with most people continuing to ‘leave an organisation because of an unsatisfactory supervisory relationship; otherwise they stay’. Chandler noticed that some individuals were making a lateral move via a short-term contract without making a career decision.

4.4.7.4 Measures of career success and the fragmentation of career theories

According to some researchers, there is evidence that career success is determined too simply and too narrowly. Arthur, Khapova and Wilderom (2005) called for rapprochement between career theory and career success research. This was because they noted that whilst many career theorists wrote increasingly of boundaryless careers, where opportunities transcended a single employer and the personal meaning of career success, a number of other researchers continued the traditional focus on career success as measured by organisational position and promotions. Their arguments in support of rapprochement included concerns about fragmentation of underlying theory, and they stated that ‘in each body of research authors have often used cross-sectional designs and relied on what is statistically measurable, potentially omitting important issues’.

Regarding the measurement of career success, these researchers identified that most career success studies measured success through the number of promotions, salary increases, or scales of career satisfaction; whilst most career theory took a broader view incorporating success within an organisation with occupational or cultural achievements such as opportunities for work/life balance. An interesting observation of Arthur, Khapova and Wilderom was that some recent research into career success had completely ignored boundaryless career theory.

The requirement for a broader view of what constitutes career success was supported by Dany, Mallon and Arthur (2003), who asserted that ‘much of the literature invites a sharper focus on the individual and the personal’ experience in career journeys. On the
other hand, these scholars observed that most of the thinking about careers was detached from the individual and personal experience, and focused instead on impersonal careers in exploring ‘independence from, rather than dependence on, the traditional organisation’.

4.4.7.5 Theories unsupported by relevant empirical data

Dany, Mallon and Arthur (2003) argued that the boundaryless career construct might be a ‘USA phenomenon’ because of the lack of empirical data gathered outside of the USA. Cappelli (1999) shared this view that there was insufficient data to substantiate the end of the one company career and its replacement with boundaryless careers. Dany (2003) undertook a comprehensive study of 279 professional workers in six different French organisations. The study collected information via semi-structured interviews and found that a weakening of business environments in France was resulting in more, not fewer, constraints on professional workers. Results of this study confirmed an ‘ontological’ need for security which prevented professionals opting for ‘radical opportunism’, according to Dany. More than 40% of French professional workers were found to have job security.

Dany, Mallon and Arthur listed four conceptual, theoretical and empirical problems with the boundaryless career construct, which led them to conclude that the literature devoted to new careers over the 1990s ‘has by no means answered all career-related questions’. They further concluded that the time was right for more debate and exploration. To support this call for review, Dany, Mallon and Arthur argued that there was insufficient knowledge of new employment conditions and their impacts on individual careers, including how people got a job and how their career aspirations were managed by the employer. They quoted Child and Gunther-McGrath as arguing, ‘one of the great unknowns with scholars’ experiments with new [organisational] forms [is] their effects on employment relationships (2001:1144)’. Their second issue concerned the lack of researcher attention to the traditional balance between the individual and the employer; the matching of the social structures and career needs of individuals, and the employment requirements of individual organisations. The boundaryless career was seen by these researchers to upset this long-standing balance at a fundamental level. Their third problem with the construct was that the new norms implicit in boundaryless
career behaviours were potentially as constraining, in their view, as the old norms. The fourth problem was one of balance and the shifting of responsibility for career from the employer to the individual.

Another potential constraint or issue was posed by Defillippi & Arthur (1994) through their question, ‘What does current research on organisational citizenship (altruistic behaviour) suggest for workers who are citizens of multiple organisational settings?’ This concern was consistent with the comment by Schein (2002) referred to earlier, ‘that it is not a joyful process to give up your values and beliefs’.

Following a review of the research that had been undertaken into career transitions which had crossed occupational and organisational boundaries and roles, and which had involved changes in the meaning of employment relationships, and to network relationships, Sullivan (1999) concluded that research had not been comprehensive. Sullivan observed that most research into occupational boundary transitions had focused on the initial career choice of college students, and that one group of researchers had found that college students changing careers tended to move towards work environments that had a greater congruence to their personality. Sullivan found it difficult to see that this would remain a consistent trend over time.

Organisational boundary transitions have been found to be usually studied through turnover data, and only six studies have examined this boundary transition from the individual rather than from the organisational perspective. Sullivan was surprised by this, stating that research generated during the 1970s and 1980 suggested that 50% of career changes were inter-organisational. Personality appeared significant in inter-firm transitions. Researchers have found that people with higher role expectations social cues were more likely to change employers and locations and receive promotions; the same applied to people with cosmopolitan personalities.

Other factors of significance in decisions to leave an organisation included executives of acquired firms who perceived that their relative standing in the new company was low. Some researchers found that female managers were more likely to leave a firm because of lack of career opportunities, job dissatisfaction or disloyalty by the employer and that these factors were more important in that decision than family considerations.
4.5 Conclusion

This chapter presents a confusing picture as emerging from the academic research into traditional and so-called boundaryless careers. Although observable and dramatic changes are occurring to organisations, the effect of those changes on careers is not clear at all. The boundaryless career as a construct is being robustly debated in the literature and the validity of the construct cannot be confirmed.

Despite evidence that business in the global economy is changing at a fundamental level, much of the change may be illusionary, at least to some extent. Schein found that regardless of all the effort that organisations injected into corporate change programs, the ‘stark reality is that few companies ever succeed in genuinely re-inventing themselves’ because, he concluded, they failed at transformational learning. When transformational change did occur, it could take a very long time, as was the case of Procter & Gamble, which according to Schein took twenty-five years. This skepticism was shared by Dany (2003), who observed that one criticism shrouding the boundaryless career literature was that changes to organisations might have been exaggerated and, as a consequence, might have produced a biased assessment of reality which overestimated the changes taking place, ‘particularly the capacity individuals have to act as free agents’. In her significant study of French professional workers, Dany found that a clear preference of professional workers was to continue their historical preference to work in large organisations, because these tended to offer higher remuneration, better training opportunities and greater job security (Dany, 2003). To date, French professional workers appear to have been successful in achieving that objective.

It is arguable that what is described as a boundaryless career has always been a reality for many people and is therefore not a new concept. This could be seen to apply to workers such as carpenters, lawyers and others with expertise, and for people with a strong internal locus of control. Perhaps what is changing is the growth of experts – a consequence of many factors such as the dramatic increases in legislation that cover most fields of business, and other complexities flowing from the likes of globalisation, and advances in technology design and usage.
It is clear that there is a wide range of variables impacting business and careers and that this will continue to produce a wide variety of employment options for workers. Researchers are utilising various data sets, and applying a variety of research methods to different research questions in their efforts to understand what is a complex network of possibilities and circumstances. Not surprisingly, this has led to conflicting findings and predictions on the nature of work experiences and the nature of future careers. This situation is not unlike that of organisations which are constantly required to base decisions on insufficient and conflicting data within a dynamic environment. In a practical sense, it is likely to mean that there will remain a wide variety of employment arrangements available to workers and that those job opportunities will continue to span traditional job opportunities and more contemporary career possibilities. The possession of current, in-demand skills combined with a strong internal locus of control will continue to provide personal power and the competitive edge in the job market, as has always been the case.

Despite the unsatisfactory state of research about careers, particularly the boundaryless career, this researcher considers that the idea of the boundaryless career is particularly useful as a construct in that it allows the consideration of an extreme extension of the traditional career – in the same way that a study of information technology, being at the cutting edge of business process, allows insight into the possible future direction of business. In this way, it is possible to conclude that Arthur and Rousseau are visionaries, that they are looking into the future rather than at what has been or what currently exists, and that with transitional space, greater numbers of workers will be attracted to this form of work. In this scenario, the boundaryless career has the potential over time to become the predominant career.

Because the boundaryless career construct can be seen as a radical departure from traditional careers, and because employing organisations can be seen to become increasingly boundaryless entities, the boundaryless career has been accepted by this researcher as the likely future direction of careers, in a broad sense, and it is therefore seen to be a useful construct against which to measure the abilities and interests of older workers. Chapter 5 reviews the literature on intrinsic motivation – a field of research that has not been evident in the scholarly work involving the boundaryless career.
5

Literature Review: Motivation and Job Design

5.1 Overview

The apparently divergent situation of the increasingly boundaryless and ill-defined global organisation and the plateaued worker was encapsulated in the literature review of Chapter 3. Chapter 4 followed with a review of the literature about the boundaryless career, thought by some career researchers to be emerging in response to the different labour needs of global organisations.

Whilst the career plateau literature indicates a general alignment of the thinking among scholars, the same is not apparent with globalisation and the boundaryless career. With globalisation, difficulties arise in forming an all-embracing view of its impact on workplaces at the micro level. There is clear evidence that in some workplaces it is business as usual. The debate amongst scholars on the boundaryless career is even more volatile than the discussion of the nature of the global business, with some career researchers completely omitting the construct from their writing. It is clear, however, that the literature on the new global business and that on the boundaryless career pay little regard to the intrinsic motivators of workers that have previously enjoyed a wide acceptance.

A logical consequence of this situation, within the context of government encouragement for extended work participation by older workers, is that a need arises to study current thinking on psychological work satisfiers, and whether this thinking is
diffusing to global workplaces. Accordingly, Chapter 5 concludes the literature review by reporting recent research into motivation and the related issue of job design, a discipline that is generally included in reviews of the literature on motivation (Latham & Pinder, 2005). The choice of literature has been selective, but the selection is representative of the larger body of knowledge about motivation and job design. The review presents evidence that a wide variety of research all points in the same direction, and that these trends have been consistently observed by this researcher over a thirty-year interest in the topic of motivation and job design. Some snap-shots of workplaces are included at the end of the chapter in an endeavour to trace the principles of motivation and job design as they are embodied in today’s exemplar workplaces. These snapshots have been chosen on the basis that the Toyota manufacturing system is known to be an exemplar, and because of respect that this researcher has for the work and observations of Canadian social scientist Bert Painter. The inclusion of the content on ‘passive’ jobs in Italy serves as a reality check by describing what work is like for a lot of people who do not work in exemplar organisations.

The content of Chapter 5 represents a refocus of this thesis away from the potential needs of global business and onto the workplace interests and needs of workers. The objective is to establish whether traditional views of worker needs remain current in the contemporary world of global business. In combination, the three literature review chapters provide the body of theory against which the case research is compared (Chapter 6). The literature review and the case studies provide the basis of the contribution to theory and practice (Chapters 7 and 8).

5.2 Research on motivation and older workers

Researchers have noted that organisational psychology, work design and the management of the older worker is under-researched, with the result that there is ‘relatively little’ understanding of the effects of ageing and adult development on work motivation (Griffiths, 1999; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004). Nevertheless, it has been observed that there is widespread acceptance of the importance of researching motivation and in that regard. Miner, (2003, p. 29) is reported by Latham and Pinder (2004) as having observed that motivation continues to hold a significant position for scholars, as ‘if one wishes to create a highly valid theory, which is also constructed with
the purpose of enhanced usefulness in practice in mind, it would be best to look to motivation theories … for an appropriate model’. Given this view, it is curious that the literature on boundaryless careers, as reported in Chapter 4, is silent on the relationship between worker motivation and boundaryless careers.

The general acceptance of the importance of motivation theory to older worker practice provides the backdrop for this chapter. The focus is on the identification of contemporary views on what is generally agreed by scholars to motivate workers. There is a particular emphasis on older workers, where such research has been identified.

5.3 Traditional theories of motivation remain relevant to most people

An interesting observation is that there is ‘neither theoretical nor empirical evidence to support the notion of an inevitable and universal decline in work motivation with age’ (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004, p. 15). Assuming this to be true, then the research that follows is broadly applicable to workers of all ages.

Latham and Pinder (2004) conducted a comprehensive examination of the progress made in motivational research over the ten years between 1993 and 2003. The research and theory embraced studies of worker needs, traits, values and cognition. In addition, Lathan and Pinder reviewed the literature dealing with the context of motivation, including issues of national culture. In the interests of brevity, their journal article chose to ignore issues such as organisational climate and culture, leadership, and the contribution that groups and teams can make to motivating a workforce. The general direction of research findings in those areas can be found throughout this thesis. For example, a summary of the cultural and leadership attributes of Australia’s best workplaces can be found later in this Chapter, as can a discussion on employee participation.

The definition of work motivation used by Latham and Pinder is instructive in terms of their orientation and focus: ‘Work motivation is a set of energetic forces that originate both within as well as beyond an individual’s being, to initiate work-related behaviour and to determine its form, direction, intensity and duration – it is a psychological
process resulting from the interaction between the individual and the environment.’ Their focus is considered, by this researcher, to be reasonable as it recognises individual differences, including the individual internal tensions which would seem to influence the thinking processes and subsequent behaviours of individuals.

Drawing on Maslow’s seminal work from the 1950s, Latham and Pinder cited a fifteen-country study reported by Ronen (2001), in Erez and Kleinbeck (2001). This study found widespread continuing support for Maslow’s theory that people have innate biological needs for acceptance and approval, status, power, control of resources and predictability and order. Further support for Maslow’s theory has been found by Ajila (1997) and Kamalanabhan et al. (1999), who found wide acceptance of the practical significance of Maslow’s theory. These two scholars observed that physiological needs affected workplace decisions about space, lighting and overall working conditions; safety was reflected in legislation and in attention directed towards safe work practices; love could be found in the activities surrounding the formation and maintenance of cohesive work teams; esteem could be found through responsibility and recognition; and self-actualisation could be found in opportunities for creative and challenging jobs and tasks.

The satisfaction of needs for acceptance, approval, status etcetera has been found to lead to behaviours for ‘getting along with others, getting ahead in terms of status, and making sense of the world’ (Lathan and Pinder, 2004). Kanfer and Ackerman (2004) reported that scholars have commonly noted that older workers have a preference for collaborative, team-based work. A study of six thousand workers undertaken through the FinnAge program in Finland found that role conflict, fear of failure or of making mistakes, lack of influence over work arrangements, lack of professional development, lack of feedback and appreciation, and non-supportive supervisory arrangements were causes of decreased effectiveness at work (Griffiths, 1999).

Lathan and Pinder’s review of the research concluded that personality and job characteristics such as autonomy continued to be accepted as important drivers of motivation. Goal-setting was also a relevant factor in motivation. If goals were perceived as impossible, offering a bonus for attainment could lower motivation, as commitment was most important and relevant when the goal was difficult but not
impossible. Negotiators who had specific, challenging and conflicting goals had been found consistently to achieve higher profits than those with no goals. Consistent with goal-setting theory, it has been generally confirmed that the higher the goal, the higher the outcome.

Giving and receiving feedback had positive impacts on motivation. New, younger employees were reported to actively seek feedback, and this behaviour was found to be positively related to high performance. A feedback source that was perceived as supportive had been confirmed by studies to increase feedback seeking, and people with a learning goal orientation saw feedback as an opportunity to improve performance. Goal-setting and social cognitive research theories continued to conclude that positive feedback in relation to goal pursuit increased both the effort and goal difficulty levels that could be attained. Goal-setting and feedback in relation to goals were keys to self-regulation.

Latham and Pinder reported that research had demonstrated that employees with high levels of personal initiative were able to change the complexity of, and control over, their workplaces even when they did not change jobs, and when confronted with setbacks. These workers typically engaged in self-enabling or self-debilitating self-talk.

In summary, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs continued to be widely recognised as relevant to motivation. Supporting motivational mechanisms such as feedback and goal-setting remained important for motivating workers. Workers with a strong internal locus of control were found to be able to reframe negative circumstances for positive outcomes.

The following paragraphs in this chapter demonstrate that in understanding motivation, the ‘devil is in the detail’.

5.4 Some general trends found in younger and older workers

It is often noted that older workers, relative to younger workers, are likely to be reluctant to undertake skills training and tend to prefer collaborative rather than competitive tasks. Kanfer and Ackerman, (2004) argued that the dynamics of adult
development in cognition, emotion, personality and the self were relevant in explaining this behaviour.

Kanfer et al. found that research of adult intellect undertaken over the previous sixty years had consistently documented differences between two broad kinds of intellectual abilities: fluid intellectual abilities, referred to as ‘Gf’; and crystallised intellectual abilities, known as ‘Gc’. Fluid intellectual abilities dealt with working memory, abstract reasoning, attention and processing of unusual information; these abilities were thought to peak when an individual reached their early twenties. Crystallised intellectual abilities related to the broader aspects of educational or experiential knowledge; such abilities encompassed vocabulary, verbal comprehension and general knowledge. Studies tended to demonstrate that these attributes continued to develop ‘well into middle age and beyond’ (Kanfer & Ackerman, p. 4).

According to Kanfer and Ackerman, their analysis indicated that jobs requiring high levels of fluid intellectual ability posed three motivational problems for older workers. This was because of the effort required of them to deal with functions that age has made them less suitable for. The risks were poorer overall performance and increased stress. This situation had led some organisations, such as air traffic control, to remove older worker from jobs that depended on fluid intellectual abilities and reassign them to other jobs, such as administration or training, that demand crystallised intellectual abilities. Despite these examples, Kanfer and Ackerman suggested caution before decisions were taken to eliminate older worker contention from certain categories of jobs. They emphasised that cognitive/intellectual effort usually represented only one of many components of a job, and argued that the requirement for high-level fluid intellectual ability might diminish after initial training, when the job might require more emphasis on tasks requiring crystallised intellectual strengths.

The relative reluctance of older workers to undertake new skill training could be seen to be problematic for themselves and their organisations. Kanfer and Ackerman predicted, on the basis of their research of work motivation and the older worker, that motivation for undertaking training would decline with age. This decline in interest was influenced substantially by the declining fluid intellectual capacity of older workers. Because of
this age-related decline, these researchers recommended that re-skilling for subsequent
career possibilities should be undertaken in early mid-life.

Consistent with findings that crystallised intellectual abilities increased over time, data
analysis from a study circa 1999 of 240 semi-skilled workers from Nottingham, United
Kingdom, found that older workers possessed more detailed contextual knowledge of
their business’s systems and procedures and their inter-dependencies than did younger
workers (Griffiths, 1999). Research conducted by Cherrington et al. (1979, p. 622)
involving 3,053 workers at all organisational levels found that older workers placed
greater importance on the ‘moral importance of work and pride in craftsmanship’ than
did younger workers, whilst younger workers tended to emphasise financial reward and
the importance of friends. The desire for promotion remained the same regardless of
age, although it was found that women were less motivated by promotional
opportunities than were men.

### 5.5 Motivation and individual differences

Latham and Pinder (2004) reported that there was general agreement amongst
researchers that need-based theories explained why a person had to act, but not why
particular actions were chosen in response to specific situations to obtain specific
outcomes. According to these authors, the desire of researchers to understand why
individuals responded in different ways had led to a resurgence of interest in individual
differences. This applied particularly to the effects of job characteristics on employee
motivation.

Importantly, Latham and Pinder found that research during the ten years they had
studied concluded that individual personality was the primary predictor of elements
of motivation. Individual personality traits – which included extroversion,
conscientiousness, self-regulatory and self-monitoring strategies such as tenacity, core
self-evaluations and goal orientation – were identified as needs or drivers. Satisfaction
of these drivers resulted in pleasure, and lack of attainment caused displeasure.

A robust positive relationship was found to exist between a self-monitoring personality
and job performance, as well as a relatively strong positive relationship between
self-monitoring personalities and advancement into leadership positions. This was thought to occur because self-monitoring people were motivated to meet the expectations of others, which in turn enhanced their likeability. Likeability, in the Latham and Pinder analysis, had been identified by many researchers to be a key determinant of job progression. Some other important findings relevant to older workers from the psychological research conducted over the past ten years were that social skills are a learned ability and that social skills are necessary for organisational success. Conclusions were also reached that extraverted people were attracted to enriched jobs, and that conscientiousness was particularly important in jobs that allowed autonomy. These personality attributes followed the characteristics of crystallised intellectual ability – abilities that develop over time and are therefore typical in older workers. Workers who were instrumental in the workplace were found to possess learning goal orientations; they focused on the acquisition of knowledge and the perfecting of competence. These people were found to choose tasks that were personally challenging.

The Latham and Pinder review of the research literature into motivation also highlighted the general recognition of the importance that personal values play in work motivation. Values were reported to be integral to most motivational theories and had been found, by researchers, to be important because they were embedded in individual needs and served as guiding principles in the life of each individual. Values were acquired through cognition and experience and were reported to arouse, direct and sustain behaviour; they also served to facilitate judgment and choice among alternative behaviours.

Many research projects discussed in the Latham and Pinder study argued that distal sources of motivation influenced self-efficacy, beliefs, work motivation levels and goals, as well as the nature of incentives and disincentives to perform. Distal sources of motivation included a person’s self-concept – their personal beliefs, needs and values; their work ethic norms and the nature of achievement. The more obscure sources of motivation included tolerance for ambiguity, the nature of one’s locus of control, as well as such environmental factors as education, socialisation experiences and economic prosperity.
The preceding paragraphs in this chapter have outlined a gradually and increasingly complex set of knowledge and principles about motivation which have been found, through research, to apply to most people. The complexity increased as the focus changed to the study of motivation at the level of the individual, because people were not identical. This latter point meant that worker motivation might be low, depending on the fit between the characteristics of the job and the person’s own values. Thus the interplay between the job context and the individual should be taken into account when jobs are designed and staffed.

5.6 Job design and the work environment

5.6.1 Overview

It has long been recognised that personal performance and satisfaction can be predicted to increase when the job, including the work environment, takes into account factors that are known as intrinsic motivators of workers. Seminal theories on job design and intrinsic motivation were developed by Americans Hackman and Oldham (1976). Their conclusions that skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback served to enhance the meaningfulness of work remain widely accepted and can be seen to underpin subsequent theory and practice such as that applying to team-based work (Wellins et al., 1991; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Mankin, Cohen & Bikson, 1997). The principles can be seen to pervade the Toyota production system, and Painter’s analysis of good industrial jobs in North America. The Toyota production system and Painter’s work are discussed later in this chapter.

Job scope is synonymous with Hackman and Oldham’s principles and it concerns the breadth of the job. Increased breadth allows enhanced opportunities for workers to use and acquire skills. Job scope includes the level of decision content within the job and the extent of employee control over the work. Researchers have consistently found that high job scope results in more satisfaction with the work, more applied effort, more attachment to the work and better performance. Low job scope has been found to lead to low satisfaction and associated absenteeism and turnover.

Supervisor behaviour or style is crucial to the work environment and is potentially the dominant factor in establishing the circumstances for positive feelings by the workforce.
This is because supervisors control the parameters of the job (Hull & Read, 2003). This point is demonstrated in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1: Stakeholder ability to influence intrinsic motivators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intrinsic motivator</th>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Organisation/supervisor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Depends on the supervisor</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety</td>
<td>As above</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning and feedback</td>
<td>As above</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual support and respect</td>
<td>As above</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholeness and meaning</td>
<td>As above</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desirable future</td>
<td>As above</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author.

The ability of the individual to construct a job containing the above motivators is clearly dependent on the job scope, and the freedom allowed by supervision which is often a factor of the level of ambiguity that can be tolerated by management. It is worth reflecting on the comments of recruitment specialist Chandler, reported earlier in this thesis, that the supervisor is the cause of people leaving organisations.

An interesting perspective on the role that the work environment plays in work satisfaction can be found through research conducted into workers who have exceeded the accepted retirement age. Although research into the benefits to the individual in working beyond their retirement age has been found to be inconclusive, Warr et al. (2004), reported that important features appeared to involve whether the individual chose the timing and circumstances of retirement or whether it was forced upon them, and the characteristics of the work environment. According to Warr et al., what mattered in any job role was the quality of the environment that was experienced by the worker.

These authors argued that any environment could be analysed in terms of nine features, which they asserted were generally recognised to be associated with subjective
well-being. These nine features can be seen to be consistent with the conclusions and directions of the theories of Maslow, Hackman and Oldman, and with the direction of all other work motivation literature that this researcher has viewed and cited in this thesis. This means that sound conclusions should be able to be drawn about the features of a work environment and job that are most likely to produce job satisfaction.

The features listed by Warr at al. specified opportunity for personal control to allow discretion in decision-making and self-determination; the opportunity to use the skills possessed by the individual; and the opportunity to develop new skills. Desirable features also included job variety and the opportunity to achieve challenging goals. This had the added benefit of allowing personal validation of effectiveness.

Environmental clarity was another important element in work motivation. A critical distinction was that clarity related to the need for low ambiguity about future developments, and to knowledge by the worker of appropriate role behaviours. An appropriate level of ambiguity, as it related to the specifics of doing the job, was found by Tremblay and Roger (2004) to be beneficial to personal control and learning and to the intrinsic motivators listed in Table 5.1. The remaining important environmental features recommended by Warr et al. involved a requirement for sufficient money to purchase goods and services to meet sustenance and pleasure needs, physical security at work, opportunity for interpersonal contact, and a social position that was valued within society.

A comprehensive review of the literature of the relationship between job scope, job design, role clarity and ambiguity, job challenge and what is known about their relationships to career plateauing was undertaken by Tremblay and Roger (2004). In their review, these researchers included their own research into Canadian public sector managers which, significantly, challenged the notion that staff sought role clarity rather than ambiguity, arguing that ‘reactions to career plateauing are more positive for managers who perceive that their job is richer and their role more ambiguous’ (Tremblay & Roger, p. 996).

Many researchers over the years have sought to take what is known about motivation to establish principles to clarify the characteristics of good jobs. There is evidence of a
great deal of consistency in their efforts and there is support, at an intuitive level, for the following typical descriptors. The example in Table 5.2 has been taken from the work of Australian workplace consultants and authors, Macneish and Richardson (1995).

Table 5.2: The fundamentals of work design (Macneish & Richardson, 1995)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source: Macneish &amp; Richardson (19995, p. 96).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Shift beyond problem-solving to whole systems thinking (interdependencies in lieu of isolated problems).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Focus on the future - the way things could be rather the way they have been.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Create a workplace capable of continuous learning, improvement and adaptation to change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Design in flexibility by redundancy of skills, rather than of people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Design the whole system rather than individual jobs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Design work so that everybody is connected to the client.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Replace dependency, wherever it occurs, with interdependency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Move from control from position and status to leadership based on clarity of a shared vision, collaboration and information exchange.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Agree to minimum critical specifications, which maximise freedom for people to improve the way they work and adapt to their environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Structure in participation, not to help people feel good but to optimise every person’s contribution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Form work teams which take part in establishing their goals, have the right to determine their unique way to achieve these goals, and the responsibility to coordinate with other parts of the organisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ensure everybody understands enough about the whole process to be able to influence how it works.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ensure everybody has the autonomy to be able to make improvements without asking for permission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have everybody help design their work. This includes planning and reviewing the work as well as doing it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ensure everybody has satisfactory remuneration and working conditions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Within the context of their team, have everybody design their work so that they can experience the six factors which make it intrinsically motivating. These are: autonomy, variety, learning and feedback, mutual support and respect, wholeness and meaning, and a desirable future.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.6.2 Employee participation

In an extensive survey of worker attitudes about participation, representation and job regulation, claimed as the most extensive for twenty years, Freeman and Rogers (1999, p. 19), found that ‘more than anything, workers want their voices to be heard’.

Employee participation, or employee involvement, has been widely reported as providing a vehicle for introducing most of the intrinsic motivators into a workplace and its jobs. (See Pettigrew, 1986; Hull & Read, 2003; Scott-Ladd and Marshall, 2004; Appelbaum, Adam, Javeri & Lessard, 2005; Cort, (2005); Ortiz & Arnborg, 2005; Woodruffe, 2005).

It is clear from the vast literature supporting employee participation that a low level of employee participation in decision-making and problem-solving, including by those employees experiencing career plateauing, is likely to lead to resistance to management-initiated improvements, including improvements in job design.

This researcher has spent many years endeavouuring to introduce, diffuse and sustain participative practices because of the improvements to jobs and outputs that can flow from successful implementation of this way of working. This researcher has found that, as a precursor to introducing participative work practices, it is necessary to provide new knowledge and insight within the organisation. This suggests that a strategic and sophisticated approach to change management is fundamental to introducing this way of working. A successful approach has involved paying attention to the context for change, the content and process for change, and management style (Pettigrew, 1986). Nevertheless this researcher has found that a participative culture is very difficult to introduce, diffuse and sustain.

Participative workplaces require supervision that is sufficiently confident and competent to manage boundaries and interfaces with other areas of the organisation, and the managements of the other parts of the organisation. From personal observation, these competencies are rare in supervisors and managers. Importantly, participative workplaces require managers throughout the organisation to let go of some of their traditional control over the work; this is very difficult for many managers, particularly
those with a low tolerance of ambiguity and with inadequate political skills. In genuinely participative workplaces, supervisors and managers hold the view that high performance is achieved through people, and that all job roles should expand vertically and horizontally rather than narrowly and in a downward direction. This latter situation has the end result of everybody doing the job of the person below them – a suppressive experience for many people.

The organisational benefits of employee participation are well documented to include enhanced productivity, enhanced creativity, acceptance of change and increased worker satisfaction. Nevertheless, employee participation is not easy to inculcate because there are competing interests and organisational politics, and there is a wide variety of individual differences between people (Machiavelli, 1469-1527; Buchanan & Badham, 1999; Green & Elffers, 1998; Pfeffer, 1992).

5.7 Problems of diffusion of the theories of motivation

5.7.1 Overview

This section discusses complexities and difficulties experienced by organisations in the translation of the theories of motivation and job design into workplace practice. This is achieved through a discussion of passive jobs, research and observations on exemplar industrial workplaces in North America by Canadian social scientist, Bert Painter; and an analysis of the well-respected Toyota production system.

5.7.2 Passive jobs and worker stress

“Forty per cent of Italian workers see their work as passive... this is the biggest work problem facing Italy today.”


A passive job is characterised by low job demands and low control over the job. An active job, on the other hand, is one in which there are high demands and high control over the work (Schaubboeck & Merritt, 1997). Job control is the extent to which freedom, independence and discretion are available to an individual in carrying
out the work (Claessens et al., 2004). The level of worker control in a job has long been found to be critical to individual worker well-being.

Karasek and Theorell (1990) defined job demands as the psychological stressors that occurred from the work environment or the workload. Much research has been dedicated to Karasek’s ‘job demands and control model’, which is also referred to as the ‘decision latitude model’. This model has, apparently somewhat inconclusively, linked job stress and, in particular, high job demands and low control, to health problems especially cardiovascular/blood pressure problems.

Schaubboeck and Merritt attributed the inconsistent findings by researchers who had applied Karasek’s model to one or more unmeasured variables, such as ‘domain-specific individual differences in the relationship between job demands and health’. Nevertheless, these researchers observed that considerable laboratory research, combined with ‘a few field successes’, had led many scholars to generally conclude that a lack of control over the job was the cause of poor individual coping with job stress and that it could also cause consequential health disorders. Schaubboeck and Merritt quoted Karasek as asserting that physiological strain resulted from the joint effects of the demands of a work situation and the amount of discretion in decision-making available to the worker facing those demands.

The Karasek model was based on two principal predictions. First, that job strain increased as job demands increased. Second, if the challenges of a job could be matched by an occupant’s ability to cope with those challenges (that is, if the individual had control over the job), appropriate behavioural patterns would take place that led to an effective channelling of arousal. Thus, high-demand, high-control jobs or ‘active’ jobs were seen not only as less conducive to stress outcomes, but also as potentially leading to health improvement via anabolic processes. If demands were high and control was low – that is, it was a high-strain job - arousal was not appropriately channelled and high strain was maintained (Schaubboeck & Merritt).

Claessens et al. (2004) found that perceived control over the elements of time, including the ability to plan work, should be included as a mediating variable between job demands, job control and work strain. He postulated that low perceived control over
time was potentially the reason that many people felt strained due to high workload and/or low job autonomy. The ability of an individual to achieve an organisation’s goals whilst being in a position to determine and plan work strategy, including priorities, methods and timing, was found by Macan (1994), in Claessens et al. (2004), to have a ‘significant relationship with perceived control of time’, which in turn was found to relate positively to job satisfaction whilst reducing job-related stress. Claessens et al. concluded, therefore, that planning behaviour led individuals to perceive that they were in control of their time, productivity, job satisfaction and health and also that they were experiencing less stress related to work. They had a stronger internal locus of control when they determined how they would use their time and the sequence of activities.

At an intuitive level, Karasek’s model and Claessen et al.’s additional insights on the ability of an individual to plan work and control time, are sensible and provide further support for the job design theories of Hackman and Oldham. Cesana provided this researcher with a journal article describing a scientific medical study undertaken by him with other medical practitioners (G Cesana et al., 2003). This study emphasised the physiological symptoms that were observed in workers performing passive roles, that Cesana contended could lead to serious stress-related problems. It is interesting that the fieldwork undertaken by Cesana et al. did not show any difference in stress levels between male and female participants, although the study did make the point that a number of females demonstrated considerable stress as a consequence of their work circumstances. A conclusion from their research, which they described as ‘inescapable’, was that workers at both ends of the distribution were the most stressed; that is, workers in passive jobs (low demands, low control) and those occupying high strain jobs (high demands, low control) were the most stressed.

Schaubboeck and Merritt (1997) provided an additional perspective, arguing that improvements to self-efficacy might be as important to a person’s well-being at work as dealing with a job that was low demand and low control. ‘Self-efficacy’ was defined by Wood and Bandura, in Schaubboeck and Merritt, as an ‘individual’s belief in their capabilities to mobilise their motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to meet given situational demands’. These scholars concluded from their research that people with high self-efficacy matched the predictions of Karasek’s model, in that such people who also had low control over work could lose confidence in their
abilities. They theorised that low self-efficacy combined with high job control and high demand had negative health consequences, because such workers were not confident in their mastery over the content of their jobs.

Further corroborating evidence of the importance of job control can be found in a study of the work experiences of 3,065 Canadian public sector managers, by Tremblay and Roger (1995), and in a study of the work experience of nurses, concluded by Yperen and Hagedoorn (2003). Tremblay and Roger reported that individuals in jobs of high scope and complexity were likely to respond more positively if the organisation or supervisor was sufficiently flexible to allow workers reasonable freedom to determine work methods and to participate in the determination of performance evaluation standards. This flexible, facilitative style of supervision could be seen, once again, to facilitate the achievement of intrinsic motivators - skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback – as prescribed by Hackman and Oldham. From an organisational perspective, an additional benefit that could accrue from this style of supervision is an increase in the problem-solving and adaptive capacity of the worker and the team (Bernicker in Watson & Nash, 1998).

There appears to be much evidence that when high job demand is coupled with low discretion, these combined effects are associated with stress and negative outcomes (Tremblay and Roger, 2004; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). In a similar vein, Yperen and Hagedoorn (2003, p. 6) reported that survey data they received from 550 nurses found that ‘as job demands increase, high job control is needed to limit fatigue’. Further, they found that ‘either high job control or high job social support is needed to enhance intrinsic work motivation’.

Although the value of worker control has been demonstrated to be overwhelmingly beneficial to workers, providing worker control can present a significant challenge to supervision as it involves the supervisor accepting a level of ambiguity in their control over work outcomes, and there can be fears of poor alignment of worker outcomes with organisational goals.

Perhaps the biggest value of Karasek’s research as it applies to this thesis is that Karasek has shown that, as a general rule, workers need stimulation for good health.
The design of work that stretches or challenges the individual, whilst allowing the individual an appropriate level of control over the job, represents good work. Work without challenge and without control is bad work. Work with challenge but with insufficient control over how it is done is bad work. In this summary, bad work equates to high stress and an apparent link to health problems.

The research outlined above demonstrates the importance of worker control over the decision-making aspects of their work. It also makes it clear that an individual in a high-demand job, with sufficient control over how that work is carried out, combined with a personal belief that they are up to the task, has the potential to be effective, motivated and should experience low levels of stress and fatigue. High levels of job control and/or social support have been shown to be necessary to efforts to enhance intrinsic motivation. This points to the requirement for a supportive supervisory environment that allows jobs to be designed and undertaken in a way that allows sufficient decision-making freedom by individual workers. It also suggests that age-based discrimination and stereotyping can be expected to produce negative consequences for job control and for self-efficacy, leading to poorer motivation and potential health issues.

Job design can be seen to pose significant challenges for supervisors. Whilst making the case for some ambiguity in a job role, which is intrinsic to discretion, Tremblay and Roger (2004) argued that balance was required, as a job with no boundaries would lead to chaos without focus. These researchers found that workers wanted room to move, but they also sought clarity around outcomes and how they would be judged. These scholars reported that the principal implication for organisations from their study was that all employees – those who had plateaued, as well as those who had not – had more positive attitudes and behaviours when they were ‘psychologically empowered in high job scope jobs and when they perceive some role ambiguity’. But these authors observed that organisations sometimes ‘fight ambiguity vigorously in dynamic work environments’.

It seems from the above that organisations that seek to address job design and supervisory practices in a way that motivates workers, face profoundly difficult challenges. For example, age-based discrimination and stereotyping are known to be
pervasive throughout society and to have direct links to older worker self-concept. The existence of large numbers of passive jobs is likely to be another consequence of age-related discrimination and stereotyping. Patterns that are similar to the Italian experience may apply universally.

5.7.3 **Industrial workplaces: exemplars**

5.7.3.1 **Exemplars in North America, Australia and elsewhere**

Despite the bleak situation presented above, exemplar organisations have been identified. Painter (1991, p. 3), a senior research associate at the British Columbia Research Corporation, studied a number of Canadian and American industrial workplaces that were ‘leaders within their respective industries for quality, yield and cost-competitiveness’. Workers in his sample of companies ‘gave their jobs a very positive rating: on average, 8 out of 10’.

Painter reported that the most important finding of his research was that all stakeholders had, and exercised, some control over the design of the technology and in the design of the work organisation using that technology. He found that workers at these workplaces learned that both the technology and the work organisation could be adjusted in practical ways to meet their needs.

Painter concluded that new information-based technology had changed work in the ways shown in Table 5.3.

**Table 5.3: Impact of information-technology on work (Painter, 1995)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact of Information-Technology on Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Islands of activity comprising operations, processes and machinery are now linked to form a continuous process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• People at different work stations and, frequently, different locations, have an immediate impact on each others work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Speed and volume have greatly increased.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Costs of equipment downtime are now much higher than they were with less capital-intensive systems. Problems of this nature are one reason often given for introducing team-based work, as this offers the potential of bringing many skills and attributes to the correction of variance (Nash &amp; Watson, 1998). Teams, comprising numbers of people, by their nature create ambiguity and the need for new technical skills and often a refinement to social skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ‘Manual skills are replaced by robots.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ‘Computerised equipment can now make many work process decisions that were previously made by people.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Table constructed by author using content developed by Painter (1995)*
The requirement for a whole systems approach to work design emerges from the above description, and this approach can be found in the best team-based work systems. When done well, team-based work designs build all of the features of good job design into the team jobs. This researcher has found that impressive industrial plants, in terms of job design and intrinsic motivation, did and possibly do continue to exist in Australia (Autoliv, Bendix, Johnson and Johnson, Colgate, Olex Cables and parts of Australia Post), the USA (Saturn – GMH, Harley Davidson), and Germany (Trumpf, Mercedes Benz).

During 2001, Hull and Read (2003) studied Australian workplaces to identify ‘drivers of excellence’. They found that the characteristics that contributed to excellent workplaces were identifiable, quantifiable and manageable. The similarities between the findings of these scholars and the preceding discussion of intrinsic motivators is clear. Hull and Read’s characteristics for excellence involved the quality of working relationships; that is, people related to each other in ways that supported and helped get the job done. Workplace leadership focused on leadership rather than management and administration. Workers participated in the decisions that affected their day-to-day work and adopted the values of the organisation, which were clear and demonstrated by all in the workforce. Careful consideration was paid to recruitment, so that new workers shared the values and approach to work of the rest of the workforce. Feedback was such that people always knew how they were perceived as individuals and how their work contribution was understood. The workplace was physically and psychologically safe and the accommodation was of a high standard. Pay and conditions were seen by the workforce as reasonable. The excellent organisation encouraged a sense of ownership and passion; it valued difference; there was a culture of learning and fun. The workforce shared a sense that their organisation was different to less excellent workplaces and they saw the organisation as part of the local community.

5.7.3.2  Toyota production system

The Toyota production system (Spear & Bowen, 1999) seemed to manage the role clarity/ambiguity mix well. According to Spear and Bowen, job roles were very clearly defined at the micro level, perhaps in a similar level of detail, as the often and perhaps incorrectly maligned scientific management model of Frederick Taylor (Weisbord,
At Toyota, all work was highly specified in terms of content, sequence, timing and outcome. Every customer-supplier interaction was required to be an unambiguous, yes or no dialogue, and the pathway for every product and service had to be simple and direct.

Although there were striking similarities between Taylorism and the Toyota approach in terms of the preciseness of job definition, the difference was in the way Toyota built thinking into its jobs at every level. This was achieved by training and development methods and the encouragement of workers, at every level, to experiment under controlled conditions. ‘Any improvement must be made in accordance with the scientific method, under the guidance of a teacher, at the lowest possible level in the organisation.’ (Spear & Bowen).

According to the observations of Spear and Bowen, workers were trained in problem definition, encouraged to experiment and in so doing design their own jobs. There were controls to prevent a change in a process upsetting the well-being of the whole system. Spear and Bowen spoke of a ‘nested modular structure, rather like traditional Russian dolls that fit one inside the other’. Higher-level structures recognised the ‘nested modules’ and all structures were determined by the problems being confronted. This led to varieties of structures that co-existed, as the structures were problem focused and informed by customer/supplier relationships.

In their review of the Toyota production system, Spear and Bowen reported that benefits for performance, quality, system improvement and enhanced problem-solving capacity had derived from supervisors and managers operating as teachers and facilitators. Their focus on teaching was complemented by a focus on the removal of impediments to the individual worker’s ability to improve Toyota’s performance.

Training in ‘thinking well’ was provided by supervisors who encouraged learning through each worker developing and using carefully framed questions and hypothesis to be tested in their jobs. This approach was fundamentally different to methods used by most other organisations to drive improvement initiatives. A common method of improvement used by other organisations, one that has been observed by this researcher,
involves the introduction of stretch targets or predetermined outcome targets to be achieved, but the implementation is frequently devoid of training and learning, and implementation can result in loss for the worker, accompanied by associated alienation.

F.W. Taylor coined the term ‘first class man’ to describe a match between the task and the challenge for each person and the ‘well-rounded foreman’. A well-rounded foreman possessed ‘brains, education, technical knowledge, strength or manual dexterity, tact, energy, grit, honesty, common sense and good health’. Interestingly, Weisbord reported that Taylor did not think it was possible to find all of these traits in one man (Weisbord, 1987, pp. 32-33). Similarly, Toyota had the notion of the ideal – the output of the ideal person, group of people or machine – and Spear and Bowen concluded that the ideal had been successfully diffused throughout the Toyota business. Toyota’s ideal consisted of the following elements, as shown in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4: Toyota: the output of an ideal person, group of people, or machine

| • Has no defects, having the features and performance expected by the customer. |
| • Can be delivered one request at a time – a batch size of one. |
| • Can be supplied on demand in the version requested. |
| • Can be delivered immediately. |
| • Can be produced without waste. |
| • Can be produced in a work environment that is safe physically, emotionally and professionally for every employee. |


The Toyota production system was widely regarded as an exemplar and had been studied closely. ‘What’s curious is that few manufacturers have managed to imitate Toyota successfully - even though the company has been extraordinarily open about its practices, and hundreds of thousands of executives have toured Toyota’s plants’ (Spear & Bowen, 1999, p. 97). Spear and Bowen postulated that many observers were confused by the apparent paradox between the discipline of the tools and practices they observed at the plant, and the overall Toyota system, which is extremely flexible.
Probably, they suggested, organisations that were unsuccessful in replicating the Toyota system, and that did not fully understand it, omitted important components of the recipe during implementation, or did not maintain the new system.

Diffusion of a system has also been found to be a complex problem. In personal correspondence, Gustavsen (1995) advised that his research team at the Swedish Work Environment Fund had observed that good ideas, developed in a particular plant in Sweden, generally did not diffuse to other companies in Sweden. This researcher has witnessed this phenomenon and observed that intra-plant or company-wide diffusion, let alone inter-company diffusion, was difficult to achieve and rarely occurred without some loss of the original design. Diffusion of the culture at Toyota appeared to be successful; it occurred through the problem-solving activities that were guided by supervisors who taught by asking open-ended questions, which resulted in workers attaining knowledge that was implicit. Workers are asked, ‘How do you do this work? How do you know you are doing this work correctly? How do you know that the outcome is free of defects? What do you do if you have a problem?’ (Spear & Bowen, p. 99)

A conclusion from the Toyota story is that the matching of worker needs to those of the organisation is complex, time consuming and requires skill and ongoing effort. The process is subtle and sophisticated, and few organisations are successful in achieving that match.

5.8 Information technology and job design

Given that Painter’s research was reported in 1991, this researcher contacted Painter in May 2006 and asked whether he would change anything, including emphasis, if he were to republish his report. His response was that he would expand upon the influence of information systems – ICT, as he referred to it.

Painter (2006) said that ICT ‘is the new dominant technical system, especially in the growth areas of services in the private and public sectors’. ICT combined with extended supply/demand chains had transformed many permanent jobs into continuously
changing temporary assignments. ‘Increasingly, people do not seem to hold a job, and whom they are working with is in continual flux’ (Painter, 2006).

Painter said that, in his experience, ICT tended to be more of a challenge for older workers who, despite their professional experience, had to be re-trained to do their jobs.

Painter has observed that workers who have traditionally owned a job in a formal organisation structure, and controlled the information deriving from that job, can now be found in a virtual or much less structured type of organisation where they no longer have control of the information and where many other people work on that information. This means that information is increasingly being disassociated from organisation structure, and this enables management to organise any way it wishes. This, in turn, changes the power that individuals possess and enables a breaking-down of traditional information control and ownership boundaries. Such a change represents a profound shift in the nature of many jobs, and this researcher has witnessed considerable resistance, including hostility, to such changes. On a positive note, these changes have opened up the possibility of learning new skills, learning new job characteristics and raising the level of ambiguity in the job. But the new skills may involve fluid intellectual abilities, which are thought to provide difficulties for older workers. The similarities between Painter’s observation of new jobs and the boundaryless career are worth noting.

Corbitt (2006) provided additional insights into how jobs were changing. He mentioned, as a demonstration of the speed of change of technology function, anecdotal evidence that the average change-over time for a mobile phone in Japan is six weeks (currently eighteen months in Australia). His identification of causes of failures in information technology implementations was also insightful. Corbitt has observed that information technology systems often fail because business leaders fail to focus on their business process, and how to solve its problems. Rather, in his view, many business leaders tended to see information technology as the solution. The correction of this problem has led to a concerted effort by organisations to drive alignment between the business need and information technology (Corbitt, 2006a; CiolIndex, 2006; Hoffman, 2003; Strassmann, 1998). Such a drive for alignment could be seen to have the potential to remove control from workers if the alignment was not managed well.
Another view of alignment difficulties facing management can be appreciated in the range of projects being undertaken in an organisation at any given time, and the levels of resistance to each, with resistance to information technology projects alone potentially coming ‘from hundreds of sources’ (Strassmann, 1998). A further complexity of alignment concerns the need to align the multiple interdependencies within an organisation; as Kaplan and Norton (2006, p. 26) noted, corporations ‘must continually search for ways to make the whole more valuable than the sum of its parts’.

Corbitt argued that successful information technology implementations were preceded by planning and a level of patience; he contended that it was not necessary to have the system deliver everything on day one. Project leadership that did not pander to unrealistic demands and deadlines, and a focus on problem prevention, precision, management of politics and avoidance of prejudice through open, enquiring minds were other important features of a good implementation. Corbitt stated that the involvement and participation of all of the people who needed to be consulted and involved was essential. In addition, Corbitt advocated the requirement for a combined implementation team focus on profits, quality and issues of quantity, as well as a paradigm shift in the way people thought about business problems.

During a subsequent discussion with Corbitt (2006a), he described the maturation of the information technology and business relationship, and in so doing pointed to the importance of teams that mix contemporary technical skills with the wisdom that is acquired over time. He said that between 1980 and 1987 there was a knowledge and age gap between the younger information technology professionals, those with fluid intellectual ability strengths, and the older management who had acquired strengths in crystallised intellectual abilities. These early years were a period of the ‘slavish following’ of advice of the young information technology people by management. Corbitt said that this was because the older management did not understand the buzzwords of the industry nor its apparent complexity. This period was followed by a period of ‘spin’ by the information technology industry, as it endeavoured to explain failures and the need for higher spending. Corbitt said that the ‘smoke and mirrors’ came to an end between 1997 and 2000 with the collapse of the so-called ‘Dot Com bubble’. This collapse followed unrealistic expectations about the business opportunities flowing from the internet, and it involved huge expenditure to prevent the
feared consequences on business of the ‘Year 2K bug’. By this time, Corbitt observed, the age demographics of the information technology leadership started to match those of general management, and as both were older, they became more conservative. As a consequence, information technology and business needs became more aligned and the information technology mystery began to dissipate. This was potentially important for older workers, as it signaled the possible end of the fear of information technology that many of them had as a consequence of not understanding the jargon, or the technology. Further, it was also potentially important as it suggested the need for a mix of people with strengths in fluid and crystallised intellectual abilities in information technology projects, teams and decisions. It is interesting that Australia Post did not suffer in the ‘Dot Com’ bust, arguably because of the influence of some older workers/leaders who occupied senior positions and were successful in moderating the enthusiasm of the generally younger technocrats (personal discussion between McCarthy and the Managing Director of Australia Post, circa 2000).

These complex issues need to be considered with any information technology introduction. There are significant implications for job design which risk being overlooked because of the many non-people-related pressures associated with a technology introduction of any sort. A high level of commitment is required by management to ensure that the principles of worker motivation and associated job design receive the attention they deserve.

Painter’s and Corbitt’s descriptions of information technology work in today’s business world beg the question as to whether current job design theories remain fully current. One issue concerns the desirability – even if it proved possible to implement it – of eliminating ambiguity from modern jobs, because such ambiguity is a feature of modern technology. The lack of clarity that accompanies ambiguity is a significant challenge for management, both in its ability to hold people accountable for performance and in its ability to manage its own (management’s) anxiety. Claessens et al. (2004) provided some support for this proposition, in that they considered information technology to be fundamentally challenging traditional job designs and management systems. These researchers reported that the more senior professional and managerial jobs had tended to increase in scope and autonomy under greater time pressures over the past two decades.
Further, they referred to studies that people undertaking this work were typically given considerable latitude in dealing with the complexity of the tasks and time pressures.

As a further indicator that job design principles might require review, this researcher has witnessed that many managers endeavour to hold people accountable for performance targets associated with earlier technologies, whilst the new technologies being used suggest new targets and new ways of working. For example, automation can require a focus on cycle time and the management of interdependencies rather than a focus on islands of activity which are often measured by machine throughputs. In the world of automation, machine throughput can change its significance from a dominant measure to that of a diagnostic tool.

5.9 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the literature on motivation and job design and found that, at a macro level, the research remains consistent with the body of knowledge that has developed over many years. This macro level theory becomes complicated when individual differences are taken into account, with some evidence that chronological age has a bearing on suitability for certain types of activity.

The application of the theories dealing with motivation and job design become extremely complex as implementation occurs at worksites. The complexity is associated with the volume of variables and boundaries that need to managed, and the personalities, goals and needs of the individuals involved. As Kaplan and Norton (2006) pointed out, alignment is a significant challenge for organisations.

Globalisation has the potential to add to this complexity. The professor of economics at Yale University (Shiller, 2006) concluded an article titled ‘Borderless Lives Owe Allegiance Nowhere’ with: ‘I fear for the future. How will the cosmopolitan class behave as their role in the world economy continues to strengthen?… How unfeeling will they come to be about the people who share their neighbourhoods?’ Cosmopolitans were described in the article as a new social class, with loyalties that cross national boundaries, a world-at-large orientation and little allegiance to local issues or concerns.
This possible future has been demonstrated to contrast with the needs of workers as currently understood. Workers are likely to continue to have their own interests. But there is hope; Pfeffer and Sutton (2006, p. 57) ask the rhetorical question, ‘Is work fundamentally different from the rest of life and should it be?’ According to Pfeffer and Sutton, some of the organisations ranked most highly on the Fortune list of best places to work endeavoured to embrace the whole person in their work designs. These authors argued that it has been well documented that such an approach has benefited the organisation through lower turnover, greater engagement and worker effort and co-operation. Such an approach may well prove beneficial as organisations are forced, in the future, to compete for a diminishing pool of skilled labour.

The overall chapter conclusion is that the body of knowledge surrounding intrinsic motivation is confirmed as being important to workers, and is important for high-performance outcomes. As a consequence, work arrangements including careers and job designs that disregard the well-established principles of motivation and job design are likely to be flawed and to produce unintended consequences. A second conclusion is that the wise worker will take action on an ongoing basis throughout their career to place themselves in control of their workplace and their destiny, rather than leave it to organisations – as has been traditional practice. In general, many organisations have limited capacity to design work that meets the specific needs of individual workers over an extended working life.

This concludes the literature review; the next chapter provides the analysis of the case studies.
6.1 Overview

The preceding chapters have outlined the importance of retaining older workers in the workforce; provided outlines of the types of organisations and jobs that older workers may have to work in; and summarised current thinking on careers, work motivation and job design.

Chapter 6 presents an analysis of forty case studies that were conducted using the methodology described in Chapter 2, with reflection on the literature review as documented in Chapters 3-5. The experience of case study participants is reported through the extensive use of their own words, as recommended by Hussey and Hussey (1997, p. 69).

Following this overview, Chapter 6 begins with a general business snapshot of Australia Post, the organisation in which the fieldwork was undertaken. One of the objectives of this snapshot is to demonstrate that the organisation is a high-performance organisation, and thereby add to the value of the fieldwork findings. This snapshot is followed by broad demographic information pertaining to Australia Post and a comparison with the situation applying generally within Australian industry.

The case studies are analysed against this broad background using the disaggregation described in the methodology in Chapter 2. The data are presented in two parts: (1) data related to career plateaus, and (2) data related to motivation and job design. Summarising data are presented in three pie charts. In totality, the pie charts can be
seen to represent work, and away from work, as a work-life system for older workers. Data are also presented in several tables within the body of the thesis. Supporting quotations from case study participants have been extracted from the records of interview and are included as appendices, and in some cases are included within the text of the chapter. The appendices are important for the insight they provide into the strength of views and emotions displayed about the work experience. The appendices also demonstrate that these emotions and views are widely held.

6.2 The research organisation: a snapshot

The field research was conducted within the national headquarters of Australia Post, the national postal service, an organisation which is highly regarded within Australia and overseas. During the 2003/04 financial year, Australia Post achieved return on revenue of 12.5% and return on assets of 15.4%. It had achieved double national productivity growth over the previous decade and maintained price increases well below the normal increases in the consumer index. Productivity improved by 3.4% during 2003/04. Australia Post enjoyed a AAA Standard and Poor’s credit rating and had received international awards such as the Transformation Award of 2004, and the No 1 Ranking (Global TNS Survey, 2004). Within Australia, the organisation had been regularly rated the most trusted Australian corporation; it achieved the highest reputation index rating over three years to 2004. Australia Post is a corporatised Government Business Enterprise; revenue generated during 2003/04 totalled $4.16 billion, producing a net profit of $371 million. The corporation employed 35,049 full-time and part-time staff, operated 4,477 post offices, served 1.10 million customers in its outlets every business day and serviced 9.7 million delivery points during 2003/04. During 2003, it handled 5.31 billion mail articles. Australia Post operates in three main markets – Letters; Parcels and Logistics; Retailing and Financial Services.
6.3 Workforce composition and supply: general view

In common with many Australian organisations, the Australia Post workforce has aged over recent years. Between 1990/91 and 2002/03, the median age of the workforce increased by ten years. This workforce ageing is illustrated in Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.1: Median age of the Australia Post workforce

Figure 6.2: Retirement patterns of Australia Post staff

Source of figures 6.1 and 6.2: Author using Australia Post data.
Figure 6.2 shows the retirement patterns of full-time and part-time staff. Most part-time staff work in employment categories other than administration. Only one of the case studies participants was employed part-time. The pattern of retirement begins from age fifty-five, with remaining employees mostly retired by age sixty-five.

Figure 6.3 compares Australia Post’s workforce demographics with similar data drawn from across all ‘Australian industries’.

**Figure 6.3:** Age comparison: Australia Post compared to general industry in Australia

![Age comparison chart](image)

*Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (1999a): CAT No: 6260.0
Australian Bureau of Statistics (2000b): CAT No: 3222.0
Australia Post data*

Compared to the All Industries figures, Australia Post has a very low workforce participation rate in the youngest category (15-25 years); this is possibly due to lower recruitment levels, or a recruitment preference for workers aged twenty-six years or older. Australia Post has a significantly higher percentage of its workforce aged from thirty-six to forty-five and from forty six to fifty-five (totalling some 65.1% of the workforce) than the All Industries average, and a lower participation rate for workers aged 55 and older. In recent times, the proportion of permanent full-time employees leaving Australia Post after age fifty-five has been increasing. This latter trend is predicted to continue; so that by 2008/09 the percentage of staff leaving in a year aged over fifty-five is projected to rise to about 40% (McCarthy, 2004).
Figure 6.4 shows a comparison of Australia Post’s workforce with the current Australian population. Future projections are made taking account of expected population demographics for years 2009 and 2014. This suggests a number of challenges for Australia Post. Specifically, Australia Post’s current largest groups by age will be shrinking relative to the total working population, and it will likely need either to increase its level of recruitment from workers under thirty-five or lift retention of workers over fifty-five – both age ranges where Australia Post has low representation. Finally, projections are that there will be significantly increased competition for labour in all age groups (see Chapter 1).

**Figure 6.4:** Australia Post’s age demographics compared to projections for the Australian population

![Age Demographics Chart](image)

Source: Figure constructed by author using Australia Post and Australian Bureau of Statistics (2000) data.

Simulation-modelling projects suggested that some 35% of Australia Post’s current executive and middle management staff would leave Australia Post between 2004 and 2009. Australia Post’s source of supply for these jobs has, over the last decade, been largely from within the organisation. Australia Post will face the prospect of increased
external recruitment to these jobs. Other organisations can be expected to compete for labour in the shrinking pool (McCarthy, 2004).

This level of change may pose significant cultural challenges to maintaining the ‘fabric’ of Australia Post. Retaining a greater number of executives and managers after age fifty-five may facilitate a smoother transition. The potential replacement of these staff with younger executives may require new approaches to knowledge transfer and may create new coaching and project roles for existing executives. It points to the need for detailed studies into the ‘Manager group’ and ‘Feeder group’ and underlines the importance of Australia Post’s succession planning and pathways initiatives (McCarthy, 2004).

The postal workforce is grouped into thirteen occupational groups. The case studies are from the ‘administration’ group. The broad age profile of each employment group is shown in Figure 6.5 below, with the administration group shown at the bottom of the table.

**Figure 6.5: Age profile by occupational groups**

![Age profile by occupational groups](Image)

*Source: Author using Australia Post data.*

In summary, the workforce of Australia Post is comprised mainly of production, transport and retail workers, with small numbers in administration and management.
6.4 Data analysis

6.4.1 Demographics of case studies: overview

The fieldwork was conducted at the national headquarters, which is situated in Melbourne. There were approximately six hundred administrative staff employed at headquarters, forty; (approximately 7%) volunteered as case study participants.

Figure 6.6 shows a good spread of the occupations of participants ranging from administrative assistant, through middle management to executive/senior executive. Two of the participants were members of the Executive Committee, the highest decision-making body below the Board of Directors. The gender and age of each case study participant is shown in brackets under the case study number. The organisational location of each participant is shown within the organisational hierarchy but the case number has been removed to protect identity.
Figure 6.6: Demographics and organisational location of case study participants

Board of Directors

Executive Committee

* = member of Executive Committee

Mail Network
Product Development
Retail & Commercial
International
Financial Accounting
and
Logistics & Supply
Security
Human Resource
Information Technology
Internal Audit

Board of Directors

Executive

Senior Executive

Case (M, 59)

Case (M, 56)

Case (M, 47)

Case (M, 53)

Case (M, 57)

Middle Management

AO 8

Case (M, 42)

Case (M, 60)

Case (M, 52)

Case (M, 41)

Case (M, 41)

Case (M, 59)

Case (M, 51)

AO 7

Case (M, 45)

Case (M, 51)

Case (M, 43)

AO 6

Case (F, 49)

Case (M, 56)

Case (M, 49)

Case (M, 46)

AO 5

Case (F, 47)

Case (F, 47)

Case (F, 48)

Case (M, 46)

AO 4

Case (F, 47)

Case (F, 52)

Source: Author.
The age of case study participants ranged from forty to sixty years. Male and female were represented, with thirteen (33%) of the participants being female. All females were employed in middle to lower management positions. Employment at the organisation ranged from two years to thirty-six years, and tenure in the current job ranged from one year to eighteen years.

An Excel database was constructed to analyse the data. The information was placed in a matrix of forty case studies multiplied by 112 cells that categorised data. In summary, the data dealt with: desired job characteristics, self-efficacy, value to the employer, and methods used to maintain skills currency. Data analysis was directed at identifying ‘gross matches and gross mismatches’ rather than subtle relationships.

Case study participants have been quoted throughout this chapter. The quotations have been taken from discussion notes. Some of the quotations may not be direct quotations but they are consistent with the intent of the participant’s comment. The issue is that, in listening intently and interpreting what participants were saying, this researcher is aware that on some occasions he used his own words to give better articulation to what the participant was saying. However, this researcher was particularly careful not to change the substance of the dialogue. This researcher certifies that the quotations appearing in the text and in the appendices are either direct quotations or have been rounded out to give a clearer articulation of what the participants intended to convey. Further, the quotations do accurately reflect the considerable emotion attaching to the views of participants and to their answers to questions.

Each participant was asked to bring to the interview a chart that showed the fluctuations that occurred during the progress of their working life. Thirty-seven of the forty participants complied. These charts are likely to provide the most accurate approach to determining whether or not the participant considered that they had plateaued. This is because the chart was their creation, and it was prepared before the interview – which provided an opportunity for reflection, and change if necessary. Naturally, participants were not aware of the technical term for the type of plateauing they might be experiencing.
Three examples of work-life charts appear at Appendix 1. Case 1 is a male who has shown a clear separation between work and life away from work – a lack of satisfaction at work, with more pleasant times away from work. Case 14 is a male executive and Case 15, a female administrative officer. These examples point to potential differences and similarities between the work experiences of men and women. Time away from work to rear children is clearly displayed in the chart of Case 15. Denial of access to superannuation schemes during the early years of employment was mentioned by another female during interview. Case 38, a female reported that ‘women get married, men have careers’. Six of the female participants (46% of female participants) referred to career interruptions on account of caring responsibilities for children. A brief description of each chart is at Appendix 2.

These charts became the prime method for determining whether or not a person had plateaued. This approach provided challenges, as it is possible that even though the chart showed the person had not plateaued at work, the chart could have been influenced by pride. Or it is possible that the individual had drawn a positive chart because they had disassociated themself from work in favour of other interests such as laying the foundations for the next stage of their life after work. Case 21 is one potential example of this possibility.

Most charts indicated whether or not the individual felt that they had plateaued at work. During the course of analysis, these charts were matched against the content of the interview and, as the researcher had quite detailed knowledge of many of the people, a further confirmation or reality check was possible. This latter check did not result in any data change, as the interview answers and spirit conveyed at interview were consistent with the interviewer’s experience of the participants.

Potential omissions that were perceived by the researcher appeared to be of a private nature such as an omission of detail about domestic situations. There was so much data that much of it could be crossed-checked, in terms of it making sense, so that patterns could be confirmed. The researcher is satisfied that the data have high validity.
In pursuit of the objective of discovering gross patterns of behaviour and outcome, the data were interrogated in many ways. Data were analysed by gender, age and job classification at the broadest levels, and then reconfigured as key issues emerged. For example, issues which participants said were important aspects of a job were also analysed by whether or not the participant had considered that they had plateaued. Further analysis of important aspects of a job considered differences by gender, by age and by job classification. Similar analyses were undertaken of learning habits, length of job tenure, future aspirations and work features that motivate and de-motivate. These analyses provide insight into career experiences focusing on organisational, content and personal plateauing; the features of work that motivate mature aged workers; how they maintain skills currency, including their preferred means of learning; and, their perception of the value they add to an organisation which provided insight into participant self-efficacy.

6.5 Career plateaus

6.5.1 Overview

Table 6.1 categorises the work-life charts of plateaued and non-plateaued participants according to age, gender, years with the organisation and job tenure. This analysis found that age, gender and time employed at the organisation were not significant as determinants of career plateauing. On the other hand, time in their current job was found to be significant.
Table 6.1:  Case studies: categorisation by age, gender, length of time at Australia Post and job tenure

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Source: Author.

6.5.2 Characteristics of career plateauing

A significant and disturbing feature of the above analysis is that at least 80% of people between age forty and sixty years had plateaued in their careers. The definition of an older worker was discussed in Chapter 1. It was found to be vague, and this researcher argued that anyone over the age of forty would be regarded as an older worker. This position being adopted because age forty coincided with anecdotal evidence, and earlier research commissioned by the researcher, which found that people over the age of forty experience age-based discrimination and stereotyping. Seven case study participants were aged between forty and forty-five; five believed that they had
plateaued. Gender differences appeared to be insignificant in that analysis as both genders were represented in the plateaued and non-plateaued cohorts.

In many cases the picture was very clear, for example, some charts showed a clear gap between life as an individual, which was stimulating and had not plateaued, compared to a more unsatisfactory life at work. Seven charts showed this differentiation very clearly; the others chose not to show a distinction between their professional and private lives. Nevertheless, thirty-two (80%) of the case study participants believed that their careers had plateaued.

All forty subjects demonstrated a generally positive view of life. They all maintained an interest in learning; and they showed through their passion for work and life generally that they were intent on overcoming any hurdles presently confronting them. These hurdles included discriminatory practices applied against them at work, boring jobs and relationship break-up. None of the forty subjects appeared to be suffering a personal or life plateau, although an ongoing professional/patient psychological relationship would seem to be necessary to validate that view.

6.5.3 Women experience career plateau ten years earlier than men

Twenty-eight of the forty case studies provided sufficient evidence through their work-life chart and interviews for this researcher to construct an approximation of the age at which they considered that they had experienced an irrevocable career plateau. This occurred in an age range from thirty to fifty-five. The average age of experiencing a structural or organisational plateau was forty-six.

It was found that on average, men felt that they had experienced irrevocable career plateauing at age fifty, whilst women experienced a perceived irrevocable career plateau ten years earlier, at age forty. Case 39, who had plateaued during one year of job tenure, and had been at the organisation for only two years, commented that ‘Australia Post does not appreciate that older workers have a fair bit to offer – you’re put on the scrap heap after fifty’. This worker considered that he had plateaued because he was in the ‘middle of a restructure’. Case 12, a female who had been employed at Australia Post
for ten years, and in her current position for two years, said ‘age and gender hold you back’. Her separation from her husband was also said to be holding her back at that time. Additionally, she said that she was plateauing at work because of the speed of changes: ‘There is so much to catch up with – when younger people interview older workers almost a screen comes up – they lose the ability to listen to what you have.’ These comments attest to the interdependency of issues that compound from the interaction of private lives on professional lives.

6.5.4 Characteristics of persons whose careers had not plateaued

Perceptions of career opportunities may not be accurate. Workers who felt that they had not plateaued included Cases 3 and 29. They presented as somewhat zealous, possibly to the extent that they ‘looked the other way’ rather than considering that they might have plateaued. It is quite possible that their view is inconsistent with the view held by the organisation. Both of these workers recounted and highlighted difficult times that they had experienced in the past. Case 3 has had to deal with retrenchment and the ongoing care of a seriously disabled child. This worker had found Australia Post to be a good employer compared to the employer that had retrenched him. He pointed out, at interview, that he wears the corporate wardrobe, which is an unusual occurrence at headquarters; he seemed to be fully embracing the organisation, and in his view the organisation was treating him better than his previous employer had done.

A similar approach was adopted by Case 29. He mentioned an acrimonious end to a specialist career that he had developed over many years. Both cases mentioned, in an exuberant way, the value of counselling and that they had enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to attend various courses which, in combination, had led to new career opportunities for them. Case 29 said that he was contributing well and that he saw benefits in himself that were not possessed by younger people working around him.

Case 21 was a very senior executive who had moved from a hands-on, state operational role to a more senior, policy role at headquarters. His previous role provided extensive learning and influencing opportunities, as he had managed a workforce of two thousand. Case 21 described his headquarters role as being less satisfying: ‘My career has
narrowed a bit in the last five to six years.’ Although his later national role was more senior, it was less challenging to him, and there were clearly no further vertical positions in the hierarchy to which he might aspire. This worker has demonstrated a transformational leadership style throughout his career and he demonstrated that his future plans outside the organisation would be filled with learning and challenge. For example, he has a personal goal of achieving a 360 degree turn whilst wind-surfing, and he planned to learn about the cultures of some other countries. Compared with the energy that he had put into work during earlier parts of his career, this worker has become less energetic and may well have begun disassociating from work, putting his discretionary effort into his retirement planning.

It is tempting to state that plateauing may be a state of mind, and whilst this may be true as demonstrated by Cases 3, 21 and 29, such a proposition is, in all likelihood, too simple. The enthusiasm demonstrated by the above three cases may be more about personal style than substance. In other words, it is possible that other case study participants are in the same situation but are normally understated in articulating their position.

Case 40 is another worker who regarded himself as not having plateaued. This worker had recently transferred into another position, at the same organisational level, to that which he had held for many years. He was exhilarated by this change but stood out by his insistence that work was not the most important aspect of his life. I ‘won’t make work a lifestyle … I would rather give up the bucks to be able to do other things’. He said that he has been accused of ‘taking it easy’. This person had not disassociated from work, but he was much less passionate about work, than some of the others who had declared that they had plateaued.

The four non-plateaued cases referred to above may well be incorrectly classified as such; it is highly likely that, in terms of climbing the corporate ladder, they have all plateaued. If that were the case, then 90% of the participants had either plateaued or were in decline. The true picture is that, in all likelihood, somewhere between 80% and 90% of participants had plateaued. It is likely also that the narrowing of promotional opportunities would mean that everybody would eventually experience an organisational or structural plateau. The three cases discussed above did not regard the
lack of promotional opportunities as a cause of career plateau. In fact, promotion was rarely mentioned during interviews.

6.5.5 Excessive job tenure causes content plateauing

Organisational or structural plateauing appears to be less destructive to the individual than content plateauing. Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that although nineteen participants (48%) said that they would like career progression, it was not clear whether they were seeking promotion or were really seeking job variety through rotation. Only two of the eight (25%) non-plateaued workers expressed interest in climbing the corporate ladder. Three of the eight non-plateaued were participants of the succession planning scheme.

Promotion was not a matter of passion, although exclusion from the succession planning system on the basis of perceived age-based discrimination was a source of annoyance in many cases. In any event, this desire for career progression was mediated by the twenty-three cases (50%) that articulated a preference for part-time work in their lead-up to retirement. Thirty-one (78%) said that opportunities for learning were very important to them in a job. This suggests that organisational/structural plateauing, when it is perceived to have been undertaken fairly, is not a concern for the older worker; what is more important is job variety and the opportunity for ongoing learning. This suggests that organisations should focus on job rotations for older workers rather than the impractical creation of additional hierarchical promotional opportunities for them.

A principal determinant of plateauing was found to be length of tenure in the current job. In the case of non-plateaued workers, tenure ranged from one-and-a-half to five years; none had worked in their present position for greater than five years. This contrasted with plateaued workers, who had, on average, worked in the same position for seven years. Females usually worked at the organisation for a shorter period than males, and those females who had not plateaued had worked at the organisation a lot less time than had their male counterparts. Table 6.2 shows that job tenure has a significant impact on perceptions of plateauing. Age and years worked at the organisation are shown not to be significant determinants of career plateauing.
Table 6.2 demonstrates that age and gender are not significantly different for non-plateaued compared with plateaued cases. It can be seen that plateauing can be experienced by either gender, at any age, although as mentioned earlier, older female workers have been found to experience perceived irreversible organisational plateaus ten years earlier than older male workers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plateaued or decline</th>
<th>Non-plateaued</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average age</strong></td>
<td>51 50 51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average years at organisation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 14 18</td>
<td>17 6 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average years in current job</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 7 7</td>
<td>3 4 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author.

The significance of this information, when analysed on a case-by-case basis with linkage made between content plateauing and corporate knowledge and motivation, is demonstrated in the following summary of people who have occupied the same job for four or more years. This is the length of time that some researchers have concluded is usual before job content plateauing occurs and the learning challenge of a job has been achieved – ‘It’s repetitious here’ (Case 47). This situation is shown in Table 6.3 and would seem to be a matter of concern for the organisation as it faces increased competition and complexity – a business environment that surely requires passion, drive, creativity, personal growth and productivity from its workers.
### Table 6.3: Job content plateaus: numbers of cases where the individual has occupied the same job for four or more years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job domain</th>
<th>Job Classification</th>
<th>Number of case studies</th>
<th>% of total cases in job classification in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>AO8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AO7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AO6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative assistant</td>
<td>AO5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AO4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total of all cases in same position for four or more years</strong></td>
<td><strong>26</strong></td>
<td><strong>65%</strong></td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Author.*

It is possible that information technology workers may suffer less job content plateauing than other workers. Four of the non-plateaued workers in the sample worked in the Information Technology Division (Cases 3, 5 and 29), while one other was engaged as an information technology specialist in the Product Development Group, having previously worked in Information Technology. A further non-plateaued case, Case 40, had aspirations to develop his existing information technology skills. As information technology is constantly changing, perhaps the rate of change drives continuous learning and in so doing serves to prevent content plateauing? This hypothesis is recommended for further study (see Chapter 7). The lack of computer literacy and the impact of that on employee perception was not studied, but intuitively, it seems likely to be a significant adverse determinant of self and organisational perception. Information technology skills currency may positively impact career opportunities and stimulate learning. Similar reasoning may explain long tenures, apparently without plateaus, in positions such as parliamentarian, where job challenge and learning is enhanced by power and serving the community.
6.5.6  General causes of career plateauing

The identification of whether or not a person had plateaued at work and, more generally, in life, proved difficult in a number of cases. Attempts were made to disaggregate each case by whether or not an individual was experiencing structural or organisational plateau, job content plateau or personal plateau. Although the interviews allowed broad discussion of issues dealing with work experiences, ideal job conditions, learning patterns, regrets and aspirations, it is likely that responses were influenced by intangibles such as how participant were feeling about life and work that day, how they interpreted the questions being asked, and whether or not there were aspects that they were uncomfortable about articulating. For example, a number of participants mentioned caring responsibilities for relatives, yet personal knowledge of many of the participants allowed the researcher to conclude that, for one reason or another, some participants had neglected to mention their caring responsibilities.

Appendix 3 lists the words used by case study participants who considered that they had plateaued, to describe their career prospects and experiences as they became older. As mentioned in the preceding paragraph, an endeavour was made to categorise worker comments according to whether the comments described structural, content or personal plateauing events. These experiences were also categorised by job classification within the organisation structure – executive, middle management and administrative assistant. The deeper analysis cast doubt on the accuracy and value of the data that had been used to categorise personal plateauing.

It can be seen from Appendix 3 that subjects gave a variety of explanations for their perceived plateauing at work. These explanations are specific and personal and based on opinions - theirs and, in some cases, those of their supervisor or manager. Most views attest to a perception by the participant that they have not had fair treatment. The most common belief was that they had experienced lack of opportunities because of their age. Fourteen people (44%) said that they had experienced age-based discrimination by being denied training and career opportunities: ‘Generational antipathy can be quite unconscious’ (Case 30); ‘It’s quite a novelty being asked when you are old’ (Case 31); ‘At age fifty I was told that there were younger people who were better to spend money on’ (Case 38).
In addition to claims of age-based discrimination, there was also claims of gender discrimination. A male participant complained of discrimination against men as the organisation endeavoured to increase the representation of women in senior roles, while two females complained that the organisation was a ‘boys club’ and that women were discriminated against for promotion. It is probable that both views could be sustained.

Two people complained that promotions were personality based - ‘jobs for mates’.

Seven people indicated that personal problems with their superior had ended their career advancement. Views held about these workers, by supervisors, were reported in terms that the workers were ‘too surly, unco-operative, lacked customer service skills, too cautious, not innovative, too slow’. Case 32 complained of a lack of interest in her by her boss. Another older worker lamented that the organisation was too big, unfeeling and fickle. Case 38 felt that she had been held back because she had been associated with so-called ‘soft culture change projects’ which had the effect of typecasting her.

Four people commented on problems they had experienced with the succession planning scheme. Two were not included and wanted to be; one had failed to clear a hurdle and had been removed from the scheme; and one, at age fifty-nine, had been placed in the scheme at a level that was a feeder group to the job level that he had occupied for some years. ‘Succession planning has been a negative for me’ (Case 4).

Eight people specifically said that they had been in the job too long. ‘As you go up in the organisation, there are not too many places to go’ (Case 47, senior executive).

Other reasons given to explain their career plateaus included a lack of qualifications; being trapped in a specialist position; being caught up in an organisational restructure; office politics; and being seen as part of the ‘old guard’ when new people were brought into senior positions following a restructure. Examples of perceptions about the ‘old guard’ and the divergence and nuances relating to work and private lives are encapsulated by the following statements.

‘I’m converging at work but diverging as a person and this is very frustrating.’

(Case 7)

‘Ageing managers can play a dead hand’ (Case 7).
Given the variety of issues and the reality that human frailties and perceptions are involved, addressing structural or organisational plateauing will be a challenge for organisations which may not bother because of competing priorities; and as mentioned previously, it was likely to be a waste of organisational effort in any case, as promotion is not a high priority for most older workers.

Content plateauing is the critical category of plateauing for both the organisation and the older worker. Long job tenure was identified as the primary cause of content plateauing. Fifteen cases (38%) complained of boredom and a lowering of learning because of a lack of role change, the narrowing of job role and a consequential lack of challenge, and insufficient workload. There was a related view that older workers were not considered for training. Case 51 said that these factors had led him to disassociate from his job, ‘I think about sailing, golf and tennis. I’m right into sailing’.

Personal or life plateauing has been described by Bardwick (1986) as occurring when an individual lacks direction in both work and non-work activities. The interviews probably do not provide sufficient depth to enable definitive statements about this type of plateauing, and psychoanalytical analysis would likely be required to determine this. Given this, and the fact that the primary task of organisations is survival, problems of personal plateauing are unlikely to be matters that organisations will address.

In combination, the structural, content and personal plateauing described above presents a depressing view of work experience and life course events. It shows a variety of experiences and causes, often individual-specific and many or most of which cannot be resolved in any practical way by the organisation that employs them. But there are environmental issues related to age-based discrimination and stereotyping, and job structures that offer the potential to alter personal circumstances in a positive way.
6.6 Career plateaus: key findings

The important findings to emerge from this analysis of career plateaus and older workers are:

1. Career plateauing proved to be a non-threatening construct for discussion about the work experience. Through a discussion of career plateaus, workers spoke freely about positive and negative aspects of their work and lives.

2. At least 93% of the case study participants were subject to organisational or structural plateau that was either initiated by the organisation or was self-imposed by choice. It is almost inevitable that the ‘ninety-nine percent rule’ will apply to all older workers eventually, that is, 99% of workers will eventually experience a terminal organisational/structural career plateau.

3. On average, organisational plateauing occurs at age forty-six. On average, female older workers may plateau at age forty – ten years earlier than older male workers who were found to plateau, on average, at age fifty.

4. Structural/organisational plateau is not a significant concern for older workers provided they are treated fairly. Structural plateauing is impractical for organisations to correct.

5. The focus of organisations and older workers ought to be on preventing content plateauing.

6. What is important to older workers is the opportunity to continue learning in the job so that content plateauing is avoided. This requires a job change, at least every five years.

7. There is clear evidence that the careers of men and women are different. The main difference is that women’s careers are often disrupted by the birth of and subsequent caring for children. This may be a reason why women tend to
occupy less senior positions than men, and why women experience structural and organisational plateauing earlier than men.

8. The methodology did not prove useful in diagnosing personal/life plateauing. A greater level of intimacy with the individual would be necessary for accurate assessment. In any event, personal/life plateauing is not a legitimate concern of business.

9. Age-based discrimination and stereotyping are major causes of content plateauing among older workers.

6.7 Motivation and job design

‘all that matters is love and work …’

Sigmund Freud

6.7.1 Older workers are passionate about work: work is part of a big system

A characteristic that emerges clearly from the interview transcripts is that all plateaued workers care deeply about work. This can be seen clearly from their remarks as summarised in the appendices. It is interesting that the non-plateaued workers were not as passionate in describing their work circumstances. This is thought to be because of their belief that their needs were being met, either through the succession planning scheme or through their retirement planning with a focus on the latter suggesting that, in those particular cases, participants might have disassociated from the organisation.

Three pie charts were constructed during the analysis stage of axial coding which was directed at connecting the data to three central categories. These categories are Figure 6.7: job design; Figure 6.8: management and supervision; and Figure 6.9: personal inter.

The three pie charts in combination can be seen as the whole system of work as far as these case study participants are concerned. The system shows that work and life for older workers is highly complex and nuanced. It can be seen that the pie charts display
three categories of participant – those non-plateaued, those plateaued, and those in decline (worse than plateaued). These categories recognised the gradients on the work-life charts brought to the interviews and the content of the discussions. Subsequent analysis resulted in a decision to combine the ‘plateaued’ and ‘declined’ because of concerns that some people tended to be more dramatic in their descriptions than did others. The combining activity was also consistent with the researcher’s desire to identify ‘gross matches or mismatches’, rather than subtleties.

**Figure 6.7: Older worker views about important aspects of job design**

*Source: Author.*
Figure 6.8: Older worker views about their supervision and management preferences

Source: Author.

Figure 6.9: Older worker personal interests

Source: Author.
6.7.2 Key aspects of motivation and job design

The discussion on career plateauing demonstrates that a wide divergence exists between
the desired work experience of older workers and the reality of their work situation.
The importance of motivation, job design and nature of supervision to older workers can
be seen in the selection of their comments that follow:

‘Perception that [my] knowledge doesn’t count for anything’ (Case 2)
‘Want to be needed by my daughter and grandchildren’ (Case 6)
Two people said that they had reached their peak already, at age forty-one, and
had nineteen years to go. ‘I’m forty-one and started thinking about retirement at
twenty – driving to work, time taken to make things happen, frustrations’ (Case 11)
‘I’ve separated from my husband recently and this has flattened me at the
moment’ (Case 12)
‘Some people over sixty years of age lose energy and enthusiasm’ (Case 14)
‘I’m starting to fold in on myself which is narrowing possibilities’ (Case 38)
‘For the last six months I have found it hard to get out of bed’ (Case 19)
‘Management don’t care enough about the people who work for them’ (Case 32)
‘I don’t know what my manager’s values are’ (Case 8)
‘I perceive myself as a dinosaur’ (Case 23)
‘I don’t get enough recognition’ (Case 32)

Case study participants were asked to identify the characteristics of work that were
important to them. They were also asked what they would like to do in retirement.
The answers to both questions are incorporated into Table 6.4, in order of significance,
as determined by the number of participants who mentioned the particular characteristic.
Table 6.4: Job and Retirement preferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred job features</th>
<th>No. of cases indicating importance</th>
<th>% of all cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity for learning</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serving the community</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to work fewer hours</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career progression</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge and ambiguity</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobbies</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with others</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance of stagnation</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity for quality outcomes</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active sport</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to use knowledge</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job variety</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control over work</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to work in teams</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning new skills</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broad job scope</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback and performance review</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward for contribution</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas valued</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair treatment</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not too much stress</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managed politics</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for sick relatives</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas implemented</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to innovate and show flair</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family worklife balance</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boss that is respected</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good relationship with manager</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of age-based discrimination</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a sponsor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility and authority</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom to speak</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear goals</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good working conditions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to share knowledge</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to be altruistic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulfilment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good communication</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient resources</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear direct leadership</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author.
It is clear that the participants responded about work and retirement in similar terms to the general trend of intrinsic work motivators and ideal job design features that have been developed by the likes of Maslow, and Hackman and Oldman. The older workers displayed the characteristics of people who had reached the stage of self-actualising, being altruistic and interested in personal growth. Control over work and time was important also. The top five most mentioned aspirations were:

Opportunity for learning (78% of cases), desire to serve the community (58%), opportunity to work fewer hours (50%), career progression (48%) and challenge and ambiguity (50%). Note: Career progression emphasised learning and interesting work rather than promotion. Promotion seemed to be of little interest to all but a handful of participants.

Intended retirement activities demonstrated strong signs of altruism and self-actualisation; (see Table 6.5).

Table 6.5: Hierarchy of retirement intentions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retirement intention</th>
<th>No. of cases</th>
<th>% of all cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Serving the community</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for sick relatives</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author.

By extracting the activities intended in retirement from Table 6.5, the characteristics of their ideal job emerge. The ideal job can be seen to involve opportunities for learning, fewer hours, which most said they would like to achieve through part-time work, challenge and ambiguity, broad job scope, job variety, control over work, team-based work, interpersonal contact, and the opportunity to deliver quality outcomes. These key work motivators for these older workers are shown in Table 6.6.
### Table 6.6: Job features that motivate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred Job and Retirement Features</th>
<th>No. of cases indicating importance</th>
<th>% of all cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Fulfilment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good communication</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient resources</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear direct leadership</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author.
The alignment consistency with the job design literature contained in Chapter 5 is apparent from Table 6.6. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs can also be seen clearly in the above table, implying that older workers with choices will look for employment that meets those needs.

Reward for contribution was well down the list of motivators in Table 6.6. Reward was not related to promotion, but rather to recognition. Good working conditions were even less significant, although it should be pointed out that these workers enjoyed very good conditions. It can be seen that reward was mentioned by nine participants (23%), working conditions by two people (5%) which provides supporting evidence that older workers tend towards the self-actualisation domain rather than the lower-order safety and physiological domains (Maslow, reported in Adair, 1990, 21-24).

6.7.3 Job design and the older worker

Interview comments about what the older workers valued in a job can be found at Appendix 5 (comments by non-plateaued older workers) and Appendix 6 (comments by plateaued older workers). Clear themes emerge and they are discussed in the following paragraphs.

6.7.4 Learning

In describing important elements of a job, thirty-one (78%) case study respondents said that they looked for opportunity for learning: ‘Growth happened when learning happened’ (Case 12), ‘Learning is important’ (Cases 13 and 20). The significance of opportunities for learning in the job can be seen in the hierarchy displayed in Table 6.7.
**Table 6.7: Important elements of personal development at work**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job characteristic</th>
<th>No. of cases</th>
<th>% of all cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity for learning</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career progression</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance of stagnation</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Opportunity to work in teams</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulfilment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* ‘Teams are Learning Machines’, Dr John Mathews, Macquarie University, NSW, personal discussion, 2001.

Source: Author.

Consistent with trends reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Figure 1.7, Chapter 1), the older workers had not undertaken award courses at universities or TAFE in recent years. Their preferred methods of learning were the adult method of learning by doing, as well as reading, short courses and learning from others. These preferences are consistent with findings reported in Chapter 5 that older workers favour work and learning that involves them using their crystallised intellectual abilities. The strength of their learning preferences is shown in Table 6.8. There was no material difference in the learning preferences of people who had plateaued and those who had not. The learning habits described by the non-plateaued older workers can be found at Appendix 4. Table 6.8 summarises the preferred means of acquiring knowledge of the case study participants.

**Table 6.8: Preferred learning methods of older workers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred learning method</th>
<th>No. of cases</th>
<th>% of all cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning by doing</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminars/short courses (includes succession planning Initiatives)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning from watching and talking to others</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author.
6.7.5  Control and trust

The work motivators described by the older workers can be grouped around the themes of control, trust, respect and personal development. This situation is consistent with the thrust of the literature about job design. Goal clarity was not significant to this group of older workers.

The data collection focus did not result in sufficient information to form sound conclusions about job stress. However, this researcher was not aware of any participants occupying low-demand, low-control jobs; or high-demand, high-control jobs with low self-efficacy. If asked, it is thought likely that the majority of the older workers would have described their jobs as low-demand, high-control with low self-efficacy. They would likely have claimed that they occupied passive jobs, and this could explain the frustrations they expressed at interview. The majority of jobs seemed to be low-demand, because of the length of tenure, and high-control, because of prevailing culture of participative management, and because no threat to job security exists. Low self-efficacy was likely to be the main cause of stress. Self-efficacy was likely to be poor, in many cases, because of perceived age-based discrimination and stereotyping which could be seen to have eliminated opportunities for advancement, training and job rotation. In summary, it is likely that the general trend for this group of older workers is that they are underutilised and suffer some stress because of their work circumstances.

Control over time and work followed the general research findings outlined in Chapter 5. And this is demonstrated in Table 6.9. The desire for control over time can be seen from the desire for fewer hours and better family/work-life balance. Control over work is specifically mentioned as important, but there are also the related matters of challenge and ambiguity, job variety, broad scope and control over resources. Issues of power can be seen to be important to older workers through their expressed desire for appropriate levels of stress, managed politics and the freedom to express views openly. Reward for contribution suggests control over income and a requirement for recognition; promotion did not emerge as an important consideration. There appears to exist a strong desire for job security amongst these older workers and it seems that they will trade boredom and frustration in favour of having a job. However, it important to recognise that these older
workers are loyal to the organisation and its mission, and this loyalty seems to become inseparable from the reality that they enjoy job security. The combination of loyalty and a desire for job security possibly leaves these older workers conflicted when they balance the good features of their employment against boredom. (Table 6.2 shows that plateaued males had worked for the organisation for an average of nineteen years, females for an average of fourteen years.)

Table 6.9 demonstrates the importance of control over work and time.

**Table 6.9: Important elements for control over work**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job characteristic</th>
<th>No. of cases</th>
<th>% of all cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fewer work hours</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge and ambiguity</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job variety</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control over work</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broad job scope</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward for contribution</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not too much stress</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managed politics</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/work-life balance</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a sponsor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom to speak openly</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear goals</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control over resources</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Author.*

The *Macquarie Dictionary* links trust to integrity, justice, hope and reliability. Trust in this context is clearly important to older workers. These elements of trust appear in Table 6.10.
Table 6.10: Important elements of trust at work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job characteristic</th>
<th>No. of cases</th>
<th>% of all cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to use knowledge</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback and performance review</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas valued</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair treatment</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas implemented</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to innovate and display flair</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boss that is respected</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good relationship with manager</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of age-based discrimination</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility and authority</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to share knowledge</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to be altruistic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good communication</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author.

Stereotyping and discrimination related to age was found to undermine trust in many cases and is potentially damaging to self-efficacy. Age-based discrimination and stereotyping were clearly unattractive to older workers and the interviews demonstrated a consequential hostility and alienation.

6.7.6 Self-efficacy

This section contrasts the perceived work realities experienced by older workers that have been described above, with the individual’s view of what they have to offer at work. There appears to be a clear disconnect between what the workers perceive the organisation values about them at work and what the organisation offers them.

Table 6.11 lists the perceptions of what participants thought that they and older workers could offer an employer. These insights were obtained from asking the question ‘What will the organisation lose when you leave?’ There were a total of thirty-six different attributes mentioned. Clear patterns emerge when like are grouped. Table 6.11 shows those patterns that can be broadly described as experience, loyalty, wisdom, interpersonal skills, networks for getting things done and organisation-specific technical skills.
Table 6.11: Attributes of older workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>No. of cases mentioning this attribute</th>
<th>% of all cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge, experience, understanding, knowing the history, ability to see the gaps because has seen the issue before</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty, commitment, affiliation with the culture and the organisation</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintains relationships, calming influence, socially cohesive</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networks, political and influencing skills</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical skills and knowledge of office routines</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author.

Appendix 7 provides a listing, by individual case, of the strengths that they as individuals bring to the workplace. The overall pattern is what could be expected of the ‘company man’. Frequently used terms used to describe themselves include wisdom, understanding, loyalty, commitment, knowledge of the history, knowledge of office routines, sense of humour, calming influence, social cohesion, tolerance, respect for the culture and the organisation, interpretive skills, concentration and perseverance, networks, political nous, resilience, devotion and caring attitude.

At the next level of complexity were attributes such as knowing which battles to fight, and an ability to make implicit knowledge explicit. Also mentioned was a ‘fifth sense’, because ‘most problems are a repeat’, and an ability to shape projects and directions. On the darker side, Case 23, an executive, said he was ‘someone who cares for down-and-out managers, and has knowledge of the secret networks that few understand’. When he leaves he thinks some will say ‘Another dinosaur, capable of supporting or sabotaging, off the books’.

Case 19 described himself as a ‘bower bird with papers’, saying that he answered twenty-five questions a day about corporate history. Very little was said about technical skills and one older worker said that the responsibility for current skills rested with the young. This view, and the lack of claims that the older workers held current technical skills, would be consistent with the evidence that ageing adversely impacts fluid
intellectual abilities. One person mentioned that he had writing skills; others spoke of skills in writing of high-level documents such as contracts and Board papers.

The pattern that emerges from absorbing the totality of the views in Table 6.11 is that the case study participants view their value to the employer as offering a calming and loyal influence, ‘a willing pair of hands’, a repository of organisational knowledge of the history and the routines for achieving things, judgment and political nous.

A serious question is whether globally challenged businesses have a place for these attributes without complementary current technical skills. A related question is what value does an organisation obtains from having these people remain at work until age sixty in lieu of fifty-five. The reduction in young workers entering the workforce means that organisations will potentially have little choice but to retain older, sub-optimised workers to cover shortfalls in labour supply. This points to the need for fundamental change to work arrangements and skill development for older workers.

Absent in the above attributes is a passion for finding new ways and challenging current thinking. The descriptions are instead passive and inert. However, this situation may be the result of a work environment that applies age-based stereotypes and lack of opportunities for learning and challenge. Such a theory could be supported by the work experiences described in Appendix 3, which describe a displeasure and even anger at how the work environment and workplace systems – such as the succession planning system – have conspired to dampen enthusiasm and make it all seem too difficult, particularly when the individual has other choices.

6.7.7 Management and supervision of the older worker

Older workers have clear views on what they would like from management and supervision; this is illustrated in the pie chart, Figure 6.8. Older workers want to be respected and valued and they want to work for a manager or supervisor who they respect. Older workers like to work in a democratic environment where there is open communication and an absence of disruptive politics. Table 6.12 lists the desired attributes of supervision and management, in hierarchical order.
Table 6.12: Attributes that older workers like in a manager or supervisor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Management attribute</th>
<th>No. of cases mentioning this attribute</th>
<th>% of all cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respect / being appreciated/fair treatment</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managed politics/freedom to speak/lack of bureaucracy</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boss they respect/good relationship with manager/having a sponsor</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback/performance review/good communication</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valued for ideas</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewards for contribution</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas implemented</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of age-based discrimination</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging projects</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good working conditions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient resources</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career development</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author.

The desired attributes can be seen clearly to align with the important features in a job, and, in combination, they can be seen to comprise the ingredients for a motivating workplace.

6.8 Conclusions about motivation and job design

It is clear that the majority of case study participants did not consider that what they had to offer was valued by the organisation, and there is considerable evidence that discrimination and stereotyping means that older workers do not get the treatment at work that they believe they should receive. This may be an incorrect assumption by the case study participants, based only on the fact that the organisation is not explicit in stating that it values its older workers. In justification of this organisational position, the organisation does have responsibilities for all staff, not just the older workers. The organisation could argue also that it is investing in training and development of the young, whilst continuing the employment of the older workers.

The information tabulated in the foregoing allows conclusions to be drawn on the ideal work situation for an older worker. Table 6.13 is a compilation of the environment that
most suits this group of older workers. The environment can be seen broadly to align with the content of the literature review in Chapter 5.

There are three components: the attributes of the manager/supervisor; the design of work; and self-efficacy. The three components are incorporated in Table 6.13 to show that the desired work environment is a whole system. It can be seen that some of the features appear under each heading. The researcher chose not to eliminate this apparent duplication, because he did not want to weaken the data through aggregation.

Table 6.13: Ideal work environment for older workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Desired manager/supervisor attributes</th>
<th>Important features of a job</th>
<th>Support for high self-efficacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respect / being appreciated / fair treatment</td>
<td>Opportunity for learning</td>
<td>Opportunity to use knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managed politics/ freedom to speak/ lack of bureaucracy</td>
<td>Opportunity to work fewer hours</td>
<td>Feedback and performance review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boss they respect/good relationship with manager / having a sponsor</td>
<td>Career progression (other than through promotion)</td>
<td>Ideas valued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback/ performance review/ good communication</td>
<td>Challenge and ambiguity</td>
<td>Fair treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valued for ideas</td>
<td>Interaction with others</td>
<td>Respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewards for contribution</td>
<td>Avoidance of stagnation</td>
<td>Ideas implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas implemented</td>
<td>Opportunity for quality outcomes</td>
<td>Opportunity to innovate and display flair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of age-based discrimination</td>
<td>Job variety</td>
<td>Boss that is respected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging projects</td>
<td>Control over work</td>
<td>Good relationship with manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good working conditions</td>
<td>Opportunity to work in teams</td>
<td>Lack of age-based discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient resources</td>
<td>Broad job scope</td>
<td>Responsibility and authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career development</td>
<td>Feedback and performance review</td>
<td>Opportunity to share knowledge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author.
The other conclusions about motivation and job design that derive from the fieldwork are:

1. Older workers are highly motivated to work.

2. The accepted motivational and job design theories apply to older workers.

3. Older workers have many important aspects to their work and lives. They tend to be driven by altruistic endeavours.

4. Older worker jobs can generally be described as passive. They are low-demand, high-control, but older workers often have low self-efficacy at work, brought about by age-based discrimination and stereotyping. This means that older workers are underutilised and potentially at risk of stress.

5. The learning behaviours and the nature of contribution to organisations by older workers tend to recognise the skills that develop over time and come from the acquisition of crystallised intellectual abilities.

Having completed the analysis of the case studies in this chapter, Chapter 7 presents the first of the two chapters that discuss the theory and practice implications of this research.
Chapters 7 and 8 discuss the implications of this research for theory and practice. Chapter 7 looks at the contribution this study makes to theory before going on to compare career theory, as contained in the literature review, with organisational practice in regard to older workers at Australia Post. It also compares the business entity that is Australia Post with the literature review on global business trends. The comparison of Australia Post with the global organisation and the accompanying comparison of the experiences of staff derived from the fieldwork at Australia Post with the broader body of knowledge about work experiences enable an informed opinion as to whether or not this research is applicable beyond Australia Post. These comparisons provide a basis for a contribution to theory and practice with respect to older workers and the organisations that employ them. This intent was illustrated in Figure 1.9, which is replicated below.
Conclusions and recommendations about the research question are reported in Chapter 8. Recommendations for further research are also included in Chapter 8.

### 7.2 Contribution to theory and practice

Pfeffer and Sutton (2006, p. 44) warned their readers to be ‘suspicious of breakthrough ideas and studies, arguing that the big idea, the big study, the big innovation rarely if ever happens. Accordingly, this researcher does not claim the big breakthrough. However, he does claim that his research meets the minimum contribution to theory and practice for the award of doctor of philosophy. The following is offered in support of this position.

A study that is as comprehensive and as deep as this has been, focusing on the career and aspirations of older workers, has not been identified as having previously occurred in Australia, or elsewhere. Given that some scholars, such as Dany, Mallon and Arthur (2003) and Cappelli (1999), observed a lack of empirical data about boundaryless careers and the end of the one company career, and others, including Hirsch et al. (2000), reported that in the economics literature, ‘scant attention has been given to employment opportunities and job content available to older workers’, it is reasonable to conclude that this study can contribute to career theory and practice, specifically to
both career plateau and to boundaryless career theory as those theories apply to older workers. In support of this statement, the researcher offers the following additional propositions.

The confluence of population ageing and declining birth rates has been said by leading management theorists such as Drucker (1999, p. 44) to be without precedent in history. Senge (1999) quoted Drucker as believing that population ageing represented the greatest management challenge of the twenty-first century. This attests to the currency of this field of research and suggests a requirement for new ways of thinking about work and the older worker.

The researcher has been active within Australian business and the field of ageing and work, having contributed to the Business Council of Australia’s policy (Business Council of Australia, 2003). This was a unique contribution to older worker policy development in Australia at that time.

A search of electronic libraries has not identified any similar study. The President of the Committee for the Economic Development of Australia (Deveson, 2006) confirmed that the 2006 Madrid conference ‘Ageing and Its Impact on Society’, attended by CEDA equivalent organisations from fifteen countries, did not address the issues related to the retention of older workers that are contained in this thesis. Nevertheless, Deveson reported that all participant countries saw the need for retention of older workers. However, he confirmed that there were no papers or discussion on what would motivate older workers to remain in work. Similarly, no papers dealing with careers were presented to the Second International Symposium on Work Ability, attended by this researcher (Verona, 18-22 October, 2004).

The size of the primary case study and its two supporting studies, totalling 132 people, is larger and more diverse than the case studies supporting Levinson’s seminal research on careers. The data were analysed by a researcher who had been embedded within the organisation for almost forty years and had specialised for most of this time in the field of work design and organisation development; this suggests potential for a level of uniqueness. It is unlikely that any other researcher has considered the
interdependencies in the same way as has this research. The study also included findings from the survey responses by 8,525 Australia Post employees concerning their retirement intentions, and a further 1,750 recent Australia Post retiree responses about factors leading them to retire, what they have done during retirement, what they would have done differently and whether their retirement expectations were different to their experiences (McDonald, 2006).

In combination, the researcher believes it reasonable to conclude that, in all likelihood, this body of research makes a distinct contribution to the body of knowledge about the careers, and career aspirations and abilities, of older workers. The researcher argues that this research more than satisfies the minimum criteria for a distinct contribution to knowledge.

‘Making a distinct contribution to knowledge would not go beyond the goal of stretching the body of knowledge slightly by using a relatively new methodology in a field, using a methodology in a country where it has not been used before....’

(Perry, 1998, p. 26)

The remainder of this chapter discusses the level of agreement and/or disagreement between the literature and the fieldwork, implications for methodology and practice and comments on the limitations of the study.

The research contributes to knowledge through its general conclusions about motivation for work and the older worker (Section 7.5); insights into structural, personal and content career plateauing. (Section 7.7); and insights into the older worker and the boundaryless career (Section 7.10). Conclusions about the issues that generated the research question are contained in Chapter 8.

The contribution to theory and practice of this research is illustrated in Table 7.1. This table lists the ‘new’ themes for each research issue. The table notes the degree to which the extant literature had explicitly addressed them.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Theme question</th>
<th>Contribution to theory</th>
<th>Contribution to practice</th>
<th>Degree addressed by extant literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(A)  RESEARCH QUESTION CONTRIBUTION TO THEORY AND PRACTICE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The boundaryless career: is there a disparity between theory, practice and desire in relation to older workers?</td>
<td>Do older workers aspire to boundaryless careers?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do older workers provide an employer offering a boundaryless career?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does a boundaryless career have the potential to liberate older workers from a career plateau?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do older workers have the potential for high performance in a boundaryless career?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the boundaryless career attractive to the older worker?</td>
<td>Does the ‘company man’ still exist in organisations?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What motivates the older worker?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is a boundaryless career the same as a portfolio career?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the older worker possess the skills required for success in a boundaryless career?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why would older workers follow a boundaryless career when they have the option of retiring?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would encourage high performance and discretionary effort from older workers pursuing a boundaryless career?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B)  OTHER CONTRIBUTION TO THEORY AND PRACTICE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the potential consequences for business</td>
<td>What are the organisational</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of older workers continuing at work longer without change in organisational or personal practice?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>practices that need change?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Some</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the personal behaviours requiring change?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the constraints on business?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constraints on individuals as older workers?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How satisfactory is the concept of career plateaus?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How accurate are assessments of organisational/structural plateaux?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are assessments of content plateau accurate?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How accurate are assessments of personal plateau?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author.

The research questions tabulated above will be addressed following discussion about the literature review and how it relates to the work experiences and aspirations of the older workers in the sample. This approach leads to an informed context for discussing the specific research questions in Chapter 8.

### 7.3 What older workers want

#### 7.3.1 Overview

The fieldwork on job motivation produced findings that were consistent with the literature on motivation and job design outlined in Chapter 5. The participants in this research work in an organisation that can be characterised as having been environmentally stable, where promotions and work histories were largely within the organisation. Australia Post remained hierarchical in nature, although the organisation followed general trends that reduced the number of middle management positions. It also introduced matrix and team-based organisation structures that sat alongside the traditional hierarchical structure. To this extent, the subjects of this thesis had careers that could be described as traditional and evolving.
Two principal causes of poor motivation for work by older workers were identified. Firstly, there was job content plateauing, caused through excessive job tenure and resulting in job boredom and insufficient new learning. Secondly, there were strong beliefs amongst many older workers that age-based stereotyping and discrimination had led to reduced respect of them and had reduced their opportunities at work.

### 7.3.2 Empowerment and paternalism

The study found that older workers exhibited strong desires for control over all aspects of work, including work design, work-associated resources and time at work. A reasonable level of job design ambiguity supports these work preferences, suggesting that management ought to be clear about the minimum specifications that govern the work of older workers but that older workers also need to be given maximum freedom to decide how they will achieve those specifications.

Older workers are critical of organisational systems that take away the power and independence they once enjoyed. They dislike organisational structures and systems with policing functions, and which restrict their resources for doing the job. For example, centralisation of purchasing was cited as a control of necessary resources by someone not accountable for outcomes. Older worker interest in control over time is demonstrated by their desire for work/life balance, with 50% having a preference for working fewer hours.

Older workers are passionate about work, but this passion is often frustrated and sometimes wasted by non-inclusive management styles, discriminatory organisational systems and associated management behaviours. Thirty-three percent specifically mentioned a strong desire to produce quality outcomes. It is likely, given their expressed enthusiasm for their work, that all would have said that quality outcomes are important to them if specifically asked. Overwhelmingly, the older workers indicated that the best work environment for quality outcomes involved a job structure that provided challenge, control over work, job variety, interaction with others, and learning. Such an environment implies sufficient ambiguity to allow the older worker to make their personal and unique contribution to the task. It is interesting to note that the study
of younger workers confirmed that similar job design features are important to them (see Chapter 3.4).

Older workers like to respect their management and supervision and like to be respected by them. They do not appreciate or respect managers who are authoritarian. Consequently, older workers desire office and organisational politics to be well managed; their wishes about management style are consistent with a vast literature supporting employee participation and participative styles of management.

At least 80% of case study participants believed that their career progression had plateaued, permanently. The workplace environment created by some management approaches and some organisational systems created an external locus of control, and placed a perceived level of powerlessness on them. This type of workplace environment is not confined to Australia Post and is apparently found in most global organisations. Korn/Ferry International, one of the world’s predominant executive search firms, reported that an international survey conducted by them in conjunction with the Economist Group had found that ‘most leaders are primarily paternalistic in their approach’ and that ‘a command and control atmosphere is still the prevailing, if not only leadership style, especially in Europe.’ (The Economist Intelligence Unit Ltd, 1996, p. 15).

Although the older workers demonstrated a strong desire to resist the negative forces they understood to impact their work, they were ineffective in challenging organisational systems that were often suspected by them to be driven by age-based discrimination and stereotyping. In addition to the difficulty of taking on ‘City Hall’ and winning, there was a possible reluctance to do so because of a strong belief and values alignment between the individual and the organisation, and flowing from that, a subtle expectation that the organisation would do the right thing by them. That is, that the powerful parent would protect the powerless child working within the family business. This is consistent with a general trend noted by a prominent organisational psychologist that people leave an organisation because of their supervisor, not because of the organisation (Chandler, 2006a).
The sense of the parent protecting its staff is reinforced at Australia Post by job security and non-retrenchment staffing policies, generous superannuation and for many, a wholly or partly subsidised car as part of their remuneration packages. The workforce enjoys high quality workplace accommodation and modern facilities such as computing, printers and colour copiers. In-house literature refers to staff as ‘our people’, with approximately 80% of the organisation’s staff wearing a uniform to work. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that organisational tenure averaged eighteen years, attesting, at least in part, to a desire to belong to Australia Post rather than to multiple employers, as implied by the boundaryless career construct. The long tenure of the case study participants, and the behaviour of the organisation, challenge the notion that the ‘company man’ era is over.

‘I’ve been in my current job for six years. Australia Post will need to do something for me in the next three years.’

Case Study No. 7

Australia Post does not appear to be different from many other organisations in regard to job tenure. Lengthy job and organisational tenure has been reported, in Chapter 1 (Figure 1.8 and Table 1.4), as normal in Australia. When organisational incentives are coupled with the human difficulties of achieving breakthrough ideas that go beyond one’s experiences, peer pressure to stay in a seemingly secure job, family and other responsibilities and commitments, and the risks associated with leaving behind the safety of what is known, it is easy to accept that the majority of workers feel bound and tied to the organisation. Executive search organisation Highland Partners posed a related question to recipients of a discussion paper that it had prepared; their question was ‘how can a highly successful audit partner or chief financial officer [who has worked in a highly structured industry or function for perhaps thirty-five years] slip seamlessly into free-association, lateral thinking, entrepreneurial exploration of their own personal careers and lifestyle?’ (Perigo, 2004, p. 18).

The dual desire for control and belonging can be satisfied by an empowered work environment that meets the needs of both organisation and older worker. Mutual commitment is the basis of effective employee participation, a management system
which gains overwhelming support from scholars and associated business literature as an alignment tool for achievement of both organisation and individual objectives. This is because employee participation allows inclusiveness; it facilitates employee growth through their involvement in decision-making and training; it is based on respect of the individual; and it encourages higher levels of discretionary effort towards organisational goals. Seen in this perspective, the older worker’s workplace desires, as articulated by case study participants, can be beneficial to the participative organisation whilst satisfying their needs as individual older workers.

On the other hand, an authoritarian management style can be an overwhelmingly negative constraint on employee participation. This is because employee participation requires a participatory management style, an approach that is yet to be widely adopted even though a vast literature exists that supports it as the preferred style for high-performance outcomes. Further, an undermining of the foundation of trust, essential to effective participative arrangements, can occur when the organisation loses control of its environment to the extent that it can no longer honour its implied commitments to its employees. In these circumstances, trust between employee and the organisation can crumble as the organisation becomes boundaryless, whilst the employees remain bounded and powerless.

In summary, the case study participants were bounded by their employment history and by their respect for the organisation, and they were powerless to counteract what many saw as age-based discrimination and stereotyping that negatively impacted their careers. A participative management style combined with supporting systems of inclusiveness could be of mutual benefit to older worker and the organisation. The trends identified at Australia Post appear to mirror those elsewhere.

### 7.3.3 Personal growth and stimulation

Clear patterns emerged from the interviews and work-life charts of what dissatisfied the greater than 80% of older workers who described their career as having plateaued and, the reverse, what motivated them. Despite these perceptions, 78% of the older workers expressed strong desires to continue their personal development, to grow as individuals, but not necessarily in work disciplines. These participants referred to the importance of
learning in their work and retirement intentions. They learn on the job by doing, by reading, through seminars and by watching and talking with others. They displayed the crystallised intellectual abilities and behaviours that are normal for older workers.

Older workers seek the support of their employer to achieve new learning opportunities. Employment-specific skills, as offered by higher education, TAFE and other educators, is not an important part of the skills maintenance strategy of older workers. Like other Australians described in ABS statistics, the case study participants tended to learn through non-work and non-institutional avenues (Chapter 1, Figure 1.7 and Table 1.3). Participants did not claim to possess current technical skills, believing these to be among the benefits and responsibilities of younger generations. This opinion is consistent with research findings that younger workers have more fluid intellectual abilities.

Many older workers appear to have given up on work-related personal development, suspecting that the effort would be unrewarded. Some expressed frustration at having been denied access to work-sponsored development through the organisation’s succession planning scheme. The 20% of people who categorised themselves as non-plateaued were either benefiting from the organisational systems, such as intensified career development via succession planning, or had found a safe place following a traumatic employment experience, or else had disengaged and were developing retirement opportunities away from the organisation.

The passion and frustrations expressed about work indicate that work remains very important to older workers and that, under the right circumstances these older workers would be enthusiastic and competent workers who would embrace new learning and new ways of working. The participants exhibited the characteristics of lifelong learners as expressed by Knapper and Cropley (see Section 7.10). The proposition that work is important to older workers is supported by an Australia Post survey of retired people that indicated 30% were currently working in other organisations following retirement. Thirty eight per cent of retired former employees said that they would like to return to work at Australia Post (see Sections 2.9.3 and 7.2).
Work is clearly only one of the important aspects of the older worker’s personal growth and life. The older workers in the case studies typically lived rich portfolio lives, often pursuing activities away from work at an elite level, with examples that included gliding, V8 super car racing, navigating in deep-sea yachting races, black-belt karate, and bookmaking at country race meetings. The pie charts shown as Figures 6.7, 6.8 and 6.9 provide an outline of the interdependencies that make up the work/life mix for this group of older workers.

### 7.3.4 Altruistic endeavours

Whilst experiencing unsatisfactory aspects of work, the older workers had strong desires and interests that were subtly pulling them away from work. These interests can be seen to provide substitute pleasure and new learning for some of the undesirable and less stimulating features of work. Older worker retirement aspirations included strong desires for volunteering and giving to the community (58% of participants), learning new things (25%), playing active sport (33%), pursuing hobbies (43%), travelling (15%) and caring for family (20%). This altruistic trait would appear to be relevant to their ongoing work choices, suggesting that the community reputation of the employer is important to older workers. A further potential impact for organisations is in the nature of key performance indicators (KPIs) that steer worker effort towards organisational outcomes. That is, positively framed KPIs are likely to be more motivational than negatively framed KPIs – the number of lives saved, rather than the number lost; the number of places at university rather than number of people denied a place there.

Consistent with the literature on work satisfiers, older workers seek stimulation at work. Participants expressed a strong preference for work that challenges them, where there is variety, broad job scope, opportunity for learning, and the freedom to use and share their skills and knowledge. Older workers appreciate the opportunity to create, innovate and demonstrate. They like to interact with others and to work in a team. However, more than 80% of the participants were not satisfied with the level of stimulation, challenge and learning in their jobs.
7.3.5 Procedural justice

Older workers have a keen interest in procedural justice in the workplace. This is demonstrated in a number of ways. They resent age-based discrimination, which many believed had caused a lack of promotion and learning opportunities for them. This perceived discrimination was often said to be compounded by ineffective feedback and unsatisfactory process for the conduct of their performance reviews. There were strong beliefs, by many, of unfair management decisions in respect of access to the succession planning scheme. For example, Case 37, a fifty-one-year-old male, described his situation as being in the ‘departure lounge’, an outcome flowing from management views on his age and tenure at the organisation.

In contrast to the desired freedom to choose and to have ‘ice to skate on’ when doing their work, older workers sought less uncertainty regarding perceived fairness and equity. They sought the opportunity to speak freely, and they sought respect and fair treatment, and to be valued for their ideas and contribution. They liked performance feedback from supervisors they trusted. Again, this was similar for the younger people studied in the Shared Services subsidiary study.

Older workers had strong beliefs in their ability to make a valuable contribution to the success of the organisation and they wished to be respected for their ability and contribution. They described their contribution in terms of experience, wisdom, social cohesion.

7.3.6 Australia Post’s older workers and workers in other places

Regardless of the arguments earlier in this chapter supporting the assertion that much of this research is unique, related research undertaken by others is informative in many areas. Motivation for work remains of interest to researchers, and much of their research is confirmed by this study. The London-based Work Foundation, for example, undertakes applied research. A comparison of some of the findings of the Work Foundation and this thesis follows in Table 7.2. It is presented as a validation that much of the research of this thesis is applicable beyond Australia Post.
Table 7.2: Healthy work: productive workplaces (Coats & Max, 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Healthy work: productive workplaces (Coats &amp; Max, 2005)</th>
<th>Findings of the case study research for this thesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bad jobs are characterised by the following factors:</td>
<td>• Supported although the organisation provides job security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Insecure employment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Monotonous and repetitive work</td>
<td>• Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A lack of autonomy, control and task direction</td>
<td>• Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• An imbalance between a worker’s effort and the rewards they receive</td>
<td>• Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• An absence of procedural justice in the workplace</td>
<td>• Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control is a particularly important factor</td>
<td>• Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work remains a positive for the majority of people.</td>
<td>• Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers have less autonomy and decision latitude than they did fifteen years ago.</td>
<td>• Not tested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An increasing proportion of employees are overqualified for the jobs they do and this produces lower levels of job satisfaction.</td>
<td>• Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-skilling, flatter hierarchies, team working and joint problem-solving are not necessarily associated with higher levels of job satisfaction and better health.</td>
<td>Supported in respect of flatter hierarchies. On the other hand, multi-skilling, team working and joint problem-solving were consistent with the desires of most participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘It seems we can be acutely aware of the psychological pain associated with losing status and will be concerned if others have too much - in other words if we have a perceived sense of unfairness.’</td>
<td>• Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I have been humiliated...I would like to have my Group Manager status restored before I retire.’</td>
<td>• Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control in the working environment is especially significant.</td>
<td>• Supported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table constructed by author using content developed by Coats & Max (2005) and author’s research.
Another Work Foundation study was conducted by Isles (2005), involving a survey of one thousand people in June 2004. Amongst other things, Isles found that as people aged the feeling of personal well-being that they attributed to certain variables tended to increase. He reported that people aged fifty-five to sixty-five found job, children, close family and wider family to be more important to their well-being than at earlier periods in their lives. This is consistent with the perceptions expressed by case study participants at interview. According to Isles, the importance of life partners was only greater between the age span twenty-five to thirty-four. The importance of leisure was similar for fifty-five to sixty-five year-old workers to the importance attributed to it at age sixteen to twenty-four. Isles reported that the importance of mates generally declined until age fifty-five to sixty-five, when there was a resurgence of interest in mateship. A similar situation applied to leisure.

The above patterns are evident from the case studies. The patterns suggest links to life stages. For example, ageing may well stimulate the reallocation of time and energy, that had been devoted to work at earlier career stages, to other endeavours.

**Table 7.3: The joy of work (Isles, 2005)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The joy of work (Isles, 2005)</th>
<th>Findings of the case study research for this thesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15% of the workforce (4 million workers) are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their jobs - they tend to be in low-skilled jobs with little or no control over when and where they work and little say in how they work.</td>
<td>Supported, although the sample of older workers demonstrated a much higher percentage of dissatisfied workers. The figure may generally be higher in respect of older workers. Certainly the methods and intentions of the studies were different, as were the countries in which the research was undertaken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A majority 61% want to work fewer hours - 70% of men and 52% of women.</td>
<td>Supported. 50% wanted to work fewer hours - 52% men and 46% women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most workers like control over when and where they work.</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8% of workers suffer from worklust, preferring to be at work rather than home.</td>
<td>The passion that was evident in interviews and supported by the earlier study into the Information Technology Division supports this possibility. ‘Work-lust’ would seem to effect a small percentage of workers; they are likely to be younger workers excited by being at the leading edge of something special, such as young IT specialists introducing a new system. Possibly also true of people involved in an unhappy relationship.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Table constructed by author using content developed by Isles (2005) and author’s research.*
The older worker participants in this study can be seen to live rich portfolio lives, as envisaged by Handy (1989), rather than the more career-focused, restrictive and less diverse boundaryless career construct. That is, there are other significant components to their lives that are at least as important to them as work. The participants typically had many more interests than the two or three principal focuses that emanated from the research. (see Section 4.3.3).

Older workers desire work that encompasses learning, stimulation and creativity, personal control, procedural justice, respect and recognition. Their retirement plans continue these themes, but there is also a strong additional preference to serve the community.

The case studies demonstrated that the older worker is often conflicted by negative and frustrating work experiences on the one hand, and the possibilities for a more enjoyable life away from work on the other. Age, financial circumstances and mounting frustration may eventually ensure that this dilemma is resolved in favour of a life that does not include the current employer. For many, it will involve a new employer. Organisations stand to gain from increased discretionary effort and organisational effectiveness if they successfully address these matters. Management and supervision can impact and mitigate potentially negative aspects of work, but it is necessary for the organisation to eliminate alienating systems as well – systems which are non-inclusive and reinforce age stereotypes and discrimination that reduce opportunities because of age, office and organisational politics or vested interests.

The research has confirmed that retaining older workers in a high-performance capacity is complex, where issues are represented as interdependencies rather than isolated and singular matters. Table 6.13 lists the ideal work circumstances for older workers - desired manager/supervisor attributes, and support mechanisms for high self-efficacy.

### 7.4 What older workers contribute

This research has studied the careers and aspirations of older workers to establish their suitability for work in today’s world. Additionally, an attempt has been made to consider the emerging future world of work and whether current behaviours leave the
older worker well placed to achieve personal work satisfaction whilst satisfying employer requirements.

The comparison of older worker attributes with twenty-first-century business requirements, as suggested by the Boston Consulting Group and as specified by the Business Council of Australia following commissioned research (Chapter 4) allows the conclusion that older workers are suitable for today’s work and for work as envisaged for the foreseeable future. Older workers have the desire and ability to learn new skills, although a study is reported in the literature review that found employers are reluctant to engage an older worker if a significant investment in their job skill development is required. The central issue is whether older workers have the desire to learn and apply new skills in a workplace that does not value them. Determinants of desire include their financial circumstances, respect and recognition of their abilities, an absence of discriminatory practices and whether work, of whatever kind, continues to have a place in their portfolio lives.

The theory of requisite response variety and its value in decision-making and business generally provides support for older workers as valuable contributors in team-based work. Many participants explicitly said that they valued working in a team and almost all appreciated the human contact that comes from working.

Older workers possess some experience-based skills and attributes that younger employees do not possess because of their youth. Older workers considered that they provided employers with skills that had been consolidated over time. They claimed to provide an employer with ‘a willing pair of hands’, a calming and loyal influence, knowledge of the history and of the work routines, and judgement and political nous in decision-making and conflict situations, and experience and safeguards against undesirable risk, which can come in many forms – such as wrong advice, quality errors, supplier cost blowouts, contracts with landlords, suppliers and customers, e-commerce and security, intellectual property protection, collapse of information technology systems etcetera (Stuart, 2007 p. 18). The calming influence can be seen as beneficial in complex and hostile industrial environments. The knowledge of history can prevent costly past mistakes from being repeated; decisions always benefit from sound wisdom.
and judgement; and political skills are very useful in navigating the rocks of politics that interfere with achieving organisational goals.

It is important to remember that employers are driven by demands placed on them by many stakeholders including investors and owners. These are the demands of survival. Handy (1989) proposed the ‘shamrock organisation’ as a way of describing what he believed was an emerging organisation comprising a professional core, a contractor group and a group of part-time and casual staff to satisfy fluctuations in demand. Handy also observed a shift in the language used to describe business from the mechanistic language that described islands of activity to relationships where things were connected. This is similar to Mant’s ‘frog and bicycle’ depiction of complexity (Chapter 8). Within this context, organisations can provide three options for the older workforce. For the highly skilled and valued, there are opportunities to work in the core of business. Other skilled people may choose to work as contractors and consultants and for those desiring part–time work, there is the option of casual work or contracting.

The changed organisational focus to managing relationships, people and systems would appear to suit many older workers, who overwhelmingly concluded that those traits were their strength; a view that is widely supported in the research literature.

7.5 Conclusions about what older workers want and can provide

To summarise the sections above, the research conducted on work satisfiers and motivation showed clearly that older workers care about work; with a large percentage indicating a preference to undertake some work during retirement. It also concluded that older workers have the capacity to satisfy organisational demands, if they want. Employers that can provide a motivating workplace with decision content in jobs, a respectful environment, personal development, and flexibility with respect to hours of work have the potential for a successful relationship with an older worker in an extended working life.
7.6 Older worker career plateaus and wasted opportunities

7.6.1 Overview

The study of career plateaus provided an opportunity to study workplace experiences as perceived by forty older worker participants. This section contributes to the theory and practice of career plateaus by comparing older worker perceptions about career plateaus and their consequences with the literature. It also provides comment on difficulties experienced by the researcher in classifying perceptions into the three generally accepted subsets that comprise plateaus – structural/organisational plateaus, content plateaus and personal plateaus.

Career plateauing has only received cursory attention to date. In her review of the literature on plateaus, Montgomery (2002) reported that most articles focused on career plateaus as a business problem and that the research was published in business journals. By comparison, Montgomery concluded that few articles addressed career plateaus as a worker issue, and those that did, tended to be published in general, non-academic journals, and in periodicals.

7.6.2 Less learning, stimulation and hope

‘Career plateauing’ was a term that was commonly used by case study participants to describe a flattening off, or decline in their job and/or learning opportunities. The patterns that emerge from the study of how people describe their particular plateau, its perceived causes and how circumstances could be improved was found to constitute a serious organisational, business, and sub-optimisation problem, and personal problem for most (more than 80%) older workers.

The research has found significant waste of human resource capital and potential because of the application of traditional beliefs that are widely held by society about ageing and work. These beliefs have been applied at work by both individual workers and their management. This subtle collusion by society, management and workers at an individual level has been found to lead to self-fulfilling outcomes and has produced negative perceptions and attitudes that find expression in alienated, frustrated, bored and
under-performing staff. Such staff conclude that they have little hope for improvement in their work futures as there are limited, if any, job movement and personal development opportunities within the organisation. As a consequence, they conclude that they have no option but to see out their time, until age eventually enables them to access superannuation and age-related taxation benefits.

The limited, or non-existent, discussion between employer and employee about career plateauing enables the costly consequences of plateauing to continue being borne by all of the actors. However, this may change with the increasing employer awareness of shortfalls in skilled labour supply which offers the potential for organisations to focus on career plateaus as a way of making better use of their older workers. Such a focus would require employers and employees to pay particular attention to worker skill maintenance and to the elimination of time-honoured business practices in that regard, including poor learning practices of all workers who see formal institutional learning ceasing at about age twenty-five. Employers would seek to eliminate excessive periods of job tenure, and systems and behaviours that support age-based discrimination and stereotyping.

On these bases, there is a need for the implications of plateauing to gain a higher profile in the business, careers and organisation development literature, to encourage a more proactive approach to career management by both organisations and individuals. It is noted that research in the United Kingdom found that only 18% of organisations offered career planning for all managers (Causon, 2006). A concerted, genuine and joint effort on career management by the organisation and individual employees should, as a natural consequence, embrace excessive job tenure and poor learning practices. Such an approach to the problem of career plateaus should encourage greater career management pro-activity, perhaps resulting in individuals envisaging themselves as a business or asset to be managed decisively when, for example, their asset is exposed by excessive job tenure. This would support employee preparation for an emerging boundaryless career.
7.6.3  Spurious assumptions and self-fulfilling outcomes

A further conclusion from this study was that it is difficult to accurately determine whether or not a person had plateaued, including the validity of the beliefs and assumptions made by people identifying as non-plateaued. For example, the eight people in the sample who did not display passion about their circumstances regarded themselves as non-plateaued. At least three of these people could be interpreted as having careers that were unlikely to involve promotion, and one was clearly focused on his next life stage.

The research would tend to confirm the view of Bardwick (1986) that the 'ninety-nine percent rule' applied, in that 99% of people plateau eventually in their working lives. This is because there are too many people for the few promotional opportunities existing within the hierarchy. However, this rule might not be as negative as implied. Although eighteen (45%) of the participants said that they were interested in career progression, they were thought likely to be realistic enough to see that the organisation structure would not allow promotion, given the small number of positions within the structure that were above their current position. Their interest in career progression was interpreted to mean job rotation rather than promotion. On this basis, a job that met most of the other management-style job features and self-efficacy criteria referred to earlier, would be likely to be highly regarded by the older worker.

7.6.4  Personal or life plateau

The research endeavoured to classify individual career plateauing by organisational/structural, content and personal/life plateauing. This proved difficult in many cases, and personal/life plateauing was found to be an inappropriate and inaccurate classification for this study.

Although personal or life plateauing did not seem to be evident in any of the participant cases studies because of the enthusiasm they displayed when discussing their lives, personal plateauing seems to invite a greater depth of analysis than is possible by business professionals who have a primary task of organisational success rather than addressing serious psychological health issues. Intervention into personal/life
plateauing is likely to require counselling and an ongoing relationship with the counsellor involving high levels of trust.

This possibly explains why Montgomery (2002) found that virtually all the career plateau articles focus ‘narrowly on only two types of career plateauing (structural and content) and ignore the issue of life plateauing’, which she observed to be frequently an offshoot of the other two types of plateauing and to have ‘far more serious long-term implications for what people will do with the rest of their lives’. This research therefore would challenge Montgomery’s suggestion that business research into career plateaus should include personal/ life plateauing.

7.6.5 **Organisational or structural plateau**

The comparatively few senior positions in the hierarchy compared to the field of aspirants attest to the reality of structural plateaus. Organisational plateaus, which involve the organisation determining that an individual has plateaued, are less certain as they are often dependent on the individual’s perceptions and interpretations. These assumptions can be wrong. In addition, supervisors change and it is possible that a new person might have a different view.

The most significant issue is that, with a handful of exceptions, the older workers were not bothered by a lack of opportunities for promotion. They were interested in job variety and new challenges. This means that organisations do not need to be concerned with the lack of opportunities for promotion for older workers. Organisations should ensure that decisions about promotions are transparent and legitimate, but beyond that, organisations ought to concentrate on the elimination of content plateauing exclusively.

7.6.6 **Content plateau**

Workers who remain too long in the same job were found to suffer job content plateau, which can potentially retard their knowledge of emerging developments, and cause them to present as a negative force when new ideas are put forward by an enthusiast of new ways of doing things. The observant employer can interpret this as blocking behaviour, with consequential negative impacts on future career success for the older worker.
Researchers have concluded that the optimum job occupancy time ranges from three-and-a-half to five years, after which content plateauing has been found to occur. This time span was confirmed by this study. Content plateauing should be a concern for Australia Post because 65% of the older workers had been in the same position for more than four years, of which 42% had held the same position for more than six years, 22% for more than ten years and 14% more than fifteen years.

Lack of attention to professional development compounds the problems of excessive job tenure. Forty-five percent of the older workers said that they rarely undertook professional development. Most (62%) said that they last undertook tertiary study more than ten years ago, and of these 48% said that their last formal education occurred more than fifteen years ago (McCarthy, 2003).

Although Duffy (2000) contended that career plateau ‘is a time of change, transition, revaluation and reflection’, this research suggested a more negative experience, as in most cases it was not a time of change at work for older workers, and it had driven many to seek fulfilment away from work. A number of participants indicated that they had plateaued at work many years earlier.

There were found to be three principal areas of career risk for older workers that can be brought about by real or imaginary career plateaus – excessive job tenure; failure to maintain skills currency; and occupancy in a low-demand, low-control job, or a high-demand, low-control job, also known as a passive job. Low self-efficacy is often associated with a passive job. Occupying and performing in a passive job role is a concern for the older worker because of its inherent stress and accompanying sense of lack of fulfilment. Eighty per cent of the sample expressed elements of low demand and medium to high control in their job, and low self-efficacy. Thus 80% of the older worker participants had passive job roles.

Leaving aside the potential health problems that can arise from them, passive jobs erode the level of self-confidence and capacity of an individual to control their career. This lack of self-confidence is evident in the tone of the discussions, particularly amongst the majority of people identifying as having plateaued; the appendices illustrate this point. When participants were asked what they offered an employer, their
descriptions, although marginally enthusiastic, lacked the passion of a person applying for a job and seemed to convey a belief that as they could not surmount the constraints placed on them at work. Nevertheless the older workers said that they could provide loyalty, knowledge of the history, a calming influence.

The multiple shorter learning cycle description of a twenty-first-century career (Hall & Mirvis, 1996) could not be validated from the case studies because of the long job tenure of the study participants. The theory of multiple, shorter learning cycles perhaps better describes the complexities and interdependencies that embody an individual’s career and general life. That is, although job tenure can be static other changes in one’s life occur with far greater frequency, and there are many dimensions to life that the employee meshes with a career. In this situation, careers and the rest of one's life cannot be compartmentalised neatly – a reality borne out by the case studies.

7.6.7 Career plateau versus reality

It does not have to be like this; older workers do not have to adopt passive roles. The workability studies underpinning the ‘Workability Index’ (Ilmarinen, 2004 - see Section 1.3.1) supported a conclusion that older workers are capable of excellent work performance. This is a conclusion supported by other research that has found that productivity declines little with age, and that with certain types of work, notably that requiring thinking, it may improve with age (Section 1.3.1).

It was almost as though the older workers had become stuck in the early, anger stage of the grieving process. This could be because of financial responsibilities, lack of skill currency, job and industry specialisation, excessive length of time in current job and the impact of being bounded by what they know. Being stuck makes the transition to other work, rather than retirement, very difficult for most to contemplate. These older worker participants remained stuck in their current circumstances, and in many cases alienated from work, hanging on until they could afford to retire, a possibility recently delayed to age sixty by significant government financial incentives.

Tremblay and Roger (2004) reported mixed views among researchers on whether a plateaued employee is less satisfied at work than one who is yet to plateau.
This research would conclude that the plateaued workers are less satisfied at work than those identifying as non-plateaued, but, on balance, the plateaued employees might be more effective at work as they were generally more passionate about their work situation. Some who had described themselves as non-plateaued may well have detached from work. In these circumstances, it is possible that non-plateaued workers could be less effective than the other 80% identifying as plateaued.

Many researchers reported that reactions to career plateaus changed over time (Ettington, 1997; Ferenze et al., 1977). No doubt this is true, as time tends to allow gradual acceptance of adverse events in other aspects of life. However, it is possible that people have more control over other aspects of living than they do at work. The case study participants felt strongly about things that they could not control, such as their supervisor’s attitudes towards them, the lack of access to learning systems, inability to gain job enrichment from job change, and perceptions of age-based stereotyping that they believed were unfair and reduced opportunities for them.

Although most participant career charts showed plateaus during earlier career stages, the participants had been younger then, and had the time and inclination to take evasive steps. As people age, and stereotypes and discriminatory practices take hold, the plateau can become permanent; 80% of the career drawings illustrated the belief that participants were in the midst of a permanent and terminal career plateau. A disturbing finding of the research was that women case study participants perceived that, on average, their work-life suffered a permanent plateau at age forty, ten years earlier than for men.

Based on this research, it is difficult to see career plateauing as anything but negative. There is an inevitability about career plateaus and the concept supports negative age stereotypes which are not helpful for organisations and governments seeking to retain older workers. The term ‘plateau’ has been observed to inspire negative perceptions in the mind of the employer (supervisor/manager) about an individual, and similarly it can be seen to have a negative impact on the individual’s self-perception. The risk is that these perceptions become self-fulfilling by both the employer and the employee, and there was much evidence of this scenario.
Some thought has been given to a reframing of the term ‘plateau’ to ‘attachment to work or various levels of absence of attachment’. Reframing was considered with a view to finding a term that implied a mutual employer/employee obligation to establish a work environment where both employer and employee needs flourish. This attempt failed. ‘Attachment’, for example, attributes blame and as a consequence would possibly yield less honest dialogue between organisations, subjects and researchers. A further difficulty for the research question of this thesis was that the notion of attachment was inconsistent with the notion of a boundaryless career, unless the attachment was to a technical discipline.

7.7 Conclusions about career plateau and wasted opportunities

Although this thesis is critical of the concept of career plateau, because of difficulties in accurately assessing its existence at the individual level, and because the negative perceptions flowing from the ‘plateau label’ can be self-fulfilling, it nevertheless recognises that the concept provided a useful mechanism or construct for enabling people to talk about their careers. It was a term the older workers themselves chose to describe their career situation. The career plateau construct has also proved to be a useful way of gaining insight into the nature and extent of the waste of human capacity as self-fulfilling perceptions of plateau were actioned in the work place.

The study of forty careers through the lens of career plateaus did provide rich patterns of data. It was a construct that people could identify with and it enabled both researcher and the employee to avoid value judgements about people and their supervisors; in this way, it provided an effective, arm’s length, analytical tool.

In the more than 80% of cases, who identified themselves as having plateaued, it was clear that achievement, skill utilisation and new learning were occurring at a lesser rate at work than away from work. In terms of capacity, this suggests significant under-utilisation of human potential. The career plateau construct can be seen to legitimise under-performance by the employee, and it diverts the employer and the employee from focusing on optimising the employee’s abilities and performance through creating the appropriate circumstances for this to occur. The career plateauing construct represents
and encourages an under-utilisation of potential effecting more than 80% of older workers. Women reported a permanent plateau at age forty on average, ten years earlier than for men. This means that the work contribution of women can be sub-optimal for twenty years, until they retire at age sixty; for men, sub-optimal contribution can be for ten years before retirement.

The research undertaken for this thesis support Sullivan (1999) who recommended that future research on women’s careers take a broader approach than earlier research. Future research into female careers should consider the interaction of multiple factors, such as timing of parenthood, family responsibilities, the career stage of the woman’s partner, organisational support by way of flexible work schedules, mentoring programs and the absence of workplace discrimination. Despite evidence that there are gender-based career differences, there are many similarities. In this study, both genders emphasised the desire for flexibility in time and job method; both liked working in teams; both liked the opportunity to acquire knowledge; and for both, learning was a key determinant of work satisfaction. Men and women both balanced work and non-work demands.

The frustration and other emotions expressed at interviews can be seen to be a demonstration that the so-called ‘plateaued people’ wished to contribute much more. The typical older worker, in this study, occupied a passive job, with low demand, medium- high control and low self-efficacy. Further evidence of under-utilisation is thought possible through the high level of interest in giving to the community. Clear patterns of altruistic intent were present in the hierarchy of job motivators and in retirement intentions which possibly are, in part, a reaction to wasted organisational contribution. The career plateau construct is a polar opposite to this altruistic intent.

Even though more than 80% regarded themselves as having plateaued, it was clear that they had not disengaged from the organisation. Furthermore, the fact that they remained employed meant that the organisation had not given up on them either. This is an important finding, as it suggests a willingness by the older worker to perform at a high level. It suggests also that the employer values the services of the older worker sufficiently to remunerate them. Nevertheless, the presence of age-based discrimination sends a different, and negative, message to the older worker. From this it can be
concluded that there is a lost potential gap which organisations and individuals can bridge together.

On a scale of 1 to 5, this researcher estimates that the lost potential of older workers might represent 3 points. The level of effort being applied by the employer to harness that lost potential is less and might be as low as 1 on the scale. It is interesting to note that the business discussion in Australia has been largely confined to shortages in skilled labour; there has been no discussion in the business press about how to maximise the contribution of existing older workers. The global emphasis on sustainability, with its implied attention to the elimination of waste, suggests that organisations might eventually take steps to eliminate this waste of human potential.

The public debate on what constitutes a skilled worker appears to be too narrow, as the focus is solely on technical skills. Absent from the debate is discussion on problem-solving capacity and the special attributes that older workers can bring to problems through their crystallised intellectual abilities. Particularly, how those abilities can be utilised in problem-solving in teams, or groups which also encompass younger workers with their special fluid intellectual abilities. A further consideration for debate is the risk to organisational outcomes of excluding older workers from the decision-making process because they are not heard.

The principle of requisite response variety (Ashby, 1956) indicates that organisational capacity increases as the skills possessed within an individual or team increases. The more skills, the more responses are possible to a business problem or issue. In an increasingly complex world, there would seem to be value in teams that possess a wide variety of contemporary skills, experiential skills, loyalty, interpersonal skills and networks. The benefits of skill and attribute variety are explained in Tables 7.4 and 7.5.
Table 7.4:  Requisite response variety: limited variety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team member</th>
<th>Skill 1</th>
<th>Skill 2</th>
<th>Skill 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 7.5:  Requisite response variety: extensive variety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team member</th>
<th>Skill 1</th>
<th>Skill 2</th>
<th>Skill 3</th>
<th>Skill 4</th>
<th>Skill 5</th>
<th>Skill 6</th>
<th>Skill 7</th>
<th>Skill 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Quantifying more precisely, in financial terms, this lost capacity – from the perspective of individual older workers and from the perspective of the organisation – would be a valuable contribution to productivity and career theory. Such a study is recommended, in Chapter 8, as an area of further research.

In view of the obvious scope for better utilisation of its older workers, it is tempting to be highly critical of the organisation for its apparent lack of interest or ability to stem this waste of human capital.
7.8 Why organisations do not make better use of older workers

7.8.1 Overview

In 2007, when skills shortages are being recognised by organisations, there are, in reality, significant constraints on any organisation being able to embark on a highly concentrated effort to satisfy the needs of its older workers. These constraints, which are discussed below, offer an explanation as to why organisations have been slow to act on the ageing workforce as an issue; see Section 1.3 for comment on government concern about the slow reaction to the problem by industry.

Consistent patterns have emerged from this research, and that undertaken by others, of what is important to workers. The obvious question is: Why don’t employers create and maintain workplaces where these factors are optimised? One reason could be that the problem is a relatively new one and that business is taking time to identify solutions. Other reasons could include the time constraints and frustrations involved in satisfying individual differences in worker requirements. The effects of competition between workers at work, which can lead to complex political interplays, may be another reason for the employer avoiding the issue and the potential lack of alignment between what the worker wants and what the employer can provide.

To date, organisational success based on a short-term focus has been given a higher management attention profile than the prospect of future skilled labour shortages. Business survival remains a more immediate problem for senior management; potential skills shortages are seen as a problem for tomorrow, for the next management team to deal with. The seemingly limited organisational interest and ability to optimise the work performance of older workers can also be attributed to embedded societal attitudes towards older workers embraced by management and workers alike, as they too are members of society.

7.8.2 Short-term profit focus

The short-term profit expectations of shareholders and investors, and the behaviour and needs of other stakeholders such as suppliers, provides a practical limit on the time and
effort that can be applied to addressing the concerns and needs of older workers. Chapter 3 described the challenging environment within which business is required to flourish. Key complications to satisfying worker demands come from investor pressures for good returns, within short time frames. Interestingly, most individual workers are now both investors, through superannuation fund membership, and wage earners. The investor-worker seeks maximum return on investment, and with a three-month time horizon. In contrast, the worker has longer term plans for themself, and along the way, seeks improved conditions and payment.

Organisations operate in a more complex, turbulent and hostile environment than do individual workers, and with many stakeholders who each seek to optimise their situation. The workforce is only one of a large and diverse group of stakeholders whose satisfaction needs to be managed by the organisation in a balanced way. The worker can appear to be, and is in reality, self-centred, and can be ‘high maintenance’, to use the current vernacular. The manager has not only worker interests, but their own as well, together with the interests of many other stakeholders demanding satisfaction. There are issues of personality differences and perceptions of organisation fit. In this milieu, the organisation endeavours to juggle competing and often conflicting aspirations, and in so doing rarely completely satisfies any particular stakeholder.

7.8.3 Business problems and complex interdependencies

There is a multiplicity of other problems facing large organisations including Australia Post. Leaving aside the impacts of operating in a global business environment, where the internet is allowing competitors to break the traditional rules and means of conducting business, there are alignment problems right across the business. As Porter (1998, pp. 383-389) has noted, ‘achieving interrelationships in practice has proven to be extraordinarily difficult for many firms’. Porter attributes this to a formidable array of organisational impediments that involve problems of cost-sharing, management behaviours that include ‘protection of turf’, attribution of blame, conflicts, performance measurement bias, matters of organisation structure and culture. Similar problems are often being confronted by all management groups across most organisational divisions and functions.
Simultaneously, management must deal with a diverse range of other business problems that can include rapid growth and the increasing complexity and tensions that accompany different visions, budget allocations and cost containment initiatives. There is likely to be tension between management and staff who see no need to change structure or strategy; there are often political fiefdoms, where the induction of new managers and new teams can create tensions; there are problems of accountability and adaptability, and issues of self-interest (Simons(a), 2005, pp. 6-15). All of these day-to-day realities constrict management’s ability to take time out to attend to the needs of the individual, older workers, who typically are seen by management to no longer possess cutting edge skills, or the enthusiasm for the work pressures mentioned above.

Sometimes there are fundamental changes being considered by top management. For example, a company might be being prepared for sale, or for listing on the stock exchange. In these circumstances, the company is unlikely to be concerned about greatness or sustainability through developing its people or building new initiatives (Collins & Porras, 2004, p. 241). Whilst these authors found that visionary companies develop, promote and carefully select in-house talent as a way of protecting core beliefs and values, it is not always possible for the organisation to achieve that. Sometimes it is necessary to recruit new people to refresh, challenge and introduce new directions (Collins & Porras, 2004, p. 173). Conflict frequently accompanies the injection of new people and new ideas, adding a further complexity to developing the ‘old guard’ of established workers.

There are many other, higher order distractions for top management in their high-paced and complex world. In these circumstances, it is easy to see an organisation avoiding the problems of older workers and absenting itself from investing in maximising their contribution. Despite these sound reasons for an apparent lack of effective organisational response, the researcher believes that the employer could do a lot more to encourage high performance from its older workers. The key focus of the organisation would be encouraging all of its workforce to pay attention to their skill maintenance over their entire working lives, starting with the youngest workers. Organisations should pro-actively identify and eliminate age-based discriminatory practices.
7.9 A growing divide between what an older worker wants and what an employer can provide

7.9.1 Overview

Until recent times, the ageing of the workforce has not been a significant business problem, as there was an abundance of younger job applicants. In times of abundant skilled, young labour, organisations have had the luxury of not having to concern themselves with their older workers.

It has been pointed out in earlier pages that adverse stereotypes about older worker are embedded within the broader community. The combination of an adequate labour supply and community-wide negative stereotypes held about older workers have encouraged an absence of a desire for work to be at the centre of older workers’ aspirations. However, this situation is expected to change progressively between 2006 and 2030 as skilled labour shortages create critical problems for Australia and its organisations – problems that are considered unlikely to be solved through increased migration.

The field research for this thesis was undertaken at a time when it was common for people to retire at age fifty-five, or shortly before that age. There was limited business discussion on looming skills shortages, and there was much evidence of age-related stereotypes having a strong influence on the decisions of management and individual workers. However, evidence is beginning to emerge that these patterns are gradually dissipating as government initiatives to encourage workforce participation to at least sixty years of age begin to influence worker behaviour. There is now a growing and broadly based employer awareness of escalating skills shortages. This is starting to focus the minds of employers on better utilisation of older workers, and employers are demonstrating a new level of respect for older workers as they seek to eliminate discriminatory practices. In these circumstances, it is possible that many older workers may decide to reduce the number of activities in their portfolio lives and return their career to the centre of their portfolio. Additionally, the workforce is becoming aware from extensive newspaper and radio content that their retirement savings may not be sufficient.
As emphasised earlier, the older worker case study participants typically had many important life components, or portfolio activities. They included work, family, hobbies, social activities, and dreams about future adventures. Because work is only one element of the older worker’s life, the term ‘portfolio living’ seems to be a better descriptor of older worker lives than the term ‘boundaryless’. Their portfolios can be seen simultaneously to constrict individuals from becoming boundaryless workers but also to push them into new endeavours which could be described as boundaryless in that they are new and sometimes ambiguous. Thus a disconnect can be seen to exist between the somewhat restricted career and the more ambiguous away-from-work activities of older workers.

The study showed also that there is a similar disconnect emerging between the dynamic and complicated business environment, and the interests that are important to its older workers. This older workforce tends to be frustrated, but passive, and in many cases not critical to organisational success. They are likely to have obsolete skills. At a fundamental level, the organisation can be seen to be transforming to a boundaryless organisation as global, business and technology pressures create ambiguity and instability. In contrast, its workforce continues to seek stability and a focus on the organisation, as loyal ‘company men’. The older workers are bounded by their inability to think beyond what they know but also by subtle pressures such as bank lending policies in respect of unstable employment. Business needs flexibility in the workplace to cope with change; workers want stability and predictability.

Within a global business world, organisations are increasingly forced into difficult compromises in which the worker, without skills currency, is at the mercy of the organisation. The organisation can no longer guarantee a continuance of past employment practices and relationships, as organisations are increasingly impacted by circumstances beyond the control of the organisation. It is not difficult to understand why older individuals, who believe themselves to be unmarketable outside the organisation, might resist a boundaryless career through fear. This is likely to encourage flight response into early retirement, or perhaps the adoption of strategies that involve clinging to current employment as long as possible.
A fundamental shift in thinking by workers offers a more empowered employment alternative for older workers. With marketable skills, a boundaryless career offers the worker the opportunity to break out of the inevitable career plateau, to be stimulated, to learn new things, to control time and to blend work with other interests. However, the extent of the shift in thinking is significant, and the case study participants are unlikely to make the transition. A consequence of this scenario is that employers and government need to begin preparing future generations of older workers. They should encourage workers to place a greater emphasis on skills maintenance throughout their entire career, from career beginning to post sixty years of age. Workers should be encouraged to think about careers in ways that defy boundaries and barriers as they search for whole new pathways to success.

7.9.2 Career management is the responsibility of the individual

One implication flowing from management’s preoccupation with survival is that the individual worker will need to place greater emphasis on their career viability, and that this emphasis ought to start at career commencement. Personal responsibility is necessary because the large organisation is too preoccupied with its own survival to play a parent role to a group of employees who are behaving more like children than players in the hard adult world of global business.

Many older workers currently believe that they are denied training and development opportunities because of their age. However, older worker circumstances and bargaining power can be expected to change in their favour as the supply of skilled young workers and the pool of imported foreign workers contract. Then, organisations are likely to find it necessary to gain a better contribution from their older workers through substantial shifts in long-established custom and practice towards older workers.
'My experience in Silicon Valley is that older workers are their own cause of replacement to the extent that they don’t update themselves.

Ultimately, it is their own career and they have to take responsibility for that.

The bottom line is the individual has to pay the mortgage, not the firm'.

Gary R. Oddou, PhD
Department Head
College of Business
Utah State University
(personal communication, circa 2001)

7.10 Conclusion: older workers are capable of high-performance contributions to organisations

7.10.1 Skills and attributes of older workers

There is considerable alignment between research conducted by other researchers and this body of research. This research enables an informed opinion that older workers have the capability of meeting employer requirements in the future. Tables 7.6 and 7.7 list the attributes of the future manager that have been identified by the Boston Consulting Group and those identified by the Business Council of Australia for the general work force. These tables compare those future attributes with the fieldwork for this thesis (see Sections 3.2.8.1 and 3.2.8.2 for earlier discussion).
Table 7.6: Suitability of older workers for twenty-first-century work: management roles (Boston Consulting Group)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Observed in older worker yes/no</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multi-generational skills</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Experienced in managing relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global edge</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Other interests suggest unlikely to be attracted to overseas work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People performance</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Experienced in managing relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible approach</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Needs to make sense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist skills</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Likely to be too organisation specific. Frequently have left their technical discipline early in their career for the greater financial rewards of generalist management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative style</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Strong preference for working with people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fully utilise female workers</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>This is a challenge for all generations and ethnic groupings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic approach to the organisation’s interests</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Older workers have the experience and aptitude to see the big picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team approach</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Preferred way of working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rounded individuals</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Experienced, lived portfolio lives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table constructed by author using content developed by the Boston Consulting Group (Hatch, 2006) and the author’s own research.

Lack of contemporary skills currency, extensive job tenure within their current job, together with a lack of interest in the upheaval likely to their private lives suggest that a senior, global career will be of little interest to the majority of the older workers in the study. On the other hand, a boundaryless career that did not involve a management role might appeal to many older workers. This possibility is demonstrated in Table 7.7.
Table 7.7: Suitability of older workers for twenty-first-century work: worker roles (Business Council of Australia).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal attribute</th>
<th>Observed in older worker</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty and integrity</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Very dependent on encouragement by boss and organisational systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal presentation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common sense</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive self-esteem</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Can be negatively influenced by employer through age discrimination and stereotyping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of humour</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balanced attitude to work and home life</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Very dependent on support from boss and organisational systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to deal with pressure</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Depends on the balance between the level of work satisfaction and choices that don’t involve work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>If it makes sense</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Employability skills**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observed in older workers</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technology skills</td>
<td>This seems to be a problem for the current generation of older workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team working skills</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative and enterprise skills</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning skills</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-management skills</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-solving skills</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Table constructed by author using content developed by the Business Council of Australia (2002) and the author’s own research.*

It is clear from Table 7.7 that older workers have the attributes that are broadly consistent with twenty-first-century work requirements as prescribed by the Business Council of Australia.
There is a significant point of difference between the emerging career literature relating the boundaryless career and, with it, the end of the ‘company man’ and their loyalty. The Business Council of Australia prescription, in contrast, has included loyalty and commitment as personal attributes that contribute to overall employability.

It is noted that the Business Council methodology refers to a literature review as part of the data collection, which focused primarily on learning and competencies. The literature review was supplemented by focus groups, individual interviews with forty small and medium-sized organisations, and thirteen detailed case studies in large enterprises. It appears significant that careers literature was not included in the Business Council literature review. The careers literature dealing with the boundaryless career has also involved case study and literature review, but seems to have arrived at different conclusions concerning loyalty and commitment.

7.10.2 Older workers value learning opportunities

An interest in learning is another important consideration in determining older worker suitability for work in the twenty-first-century. Knapper and Cropley (2000, p. 47) describe a lifelong learner as an individual who is keenly aware of the link between learning and life, and who is highly motivated to engage in the process of learning. In doing so, the individual gains the necessary confidence and learning skills. Knapper and Cropley’s discussion encompasses both lifelong learning and life-wide learning, which emphasises the breadth of opportunities for learning. Their list of the required skills for learners is contained in Table 7.8. The table includes the stated behaviours of case study participants. A comparison between Knapper and Cropley’s criteria and the stated behaviours of the case study participants allows a conclusion that the older workers displayed the attributes of lifelong learners. This adds further support to the conclusion that older workers possess the attributes to be able to contribute to modern organisations in a valuable way.
Table 7.8: Older workers as life long learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knapper and Cropley life-long learner descriptor</th>
<th>Attribute possessed by case study participants?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning and monitoring their learning</td>
<td>Probably</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging in self-evaluation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment that focuses on feedback for change and improvement</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active, not passive, learning</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning in formal and informal settings</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning with and from peers</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locating and evaluating information from a wide range of sources</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrating ideas from different fields</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using different learning strategies as needed and appropriate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tackling real-world problems</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressing process, as well as content</td>
<td>Probably</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table constructed by author using content developed by Knapper and Cropley (2000) and the author’s own research.

7.10.3 The ideal work environment for the older worker

The principal determinant of high performance and longer participation in work by older workers will likely be the work environment created by the organisation and the workers’ manager/supervisor. The desired work environment identified by the fieldwork was summarised in Chapter 6 and is reproduced below.
Table 7.9: Ideal work environment for engaging older workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Desired manager/supervisor attributes</th>
<th>Important features of a job</th>
<th>Support for high self-efficacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respect / being appreciated / fair treatment</td>
<td>Opportunity for learning</td>
<td>Opportunity to use knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managed politics / freedom to speak / lack of bureaucracy</td>
<td>Opportunity to work fewer hours</td>
<td>Feedback and performance review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boss they respect / good relationship with manager / having a sponsor</td>
<td>Career progression (other than through promotion)</td>
<td>Ideas valued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback/ performance review/ good communication</td>
<td>Challenge and ambiguity</td>
<td>Fair treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valued for ideas</td>
<td>Interaction with others</td>
<td>Respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewards for contribution</td>
<td>Avoidance of stagnation</td>
<td>Ideas implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas implemented</td>
<td>Opportunity for quality outcomes</td>
<td>Opportunity to innovate and display flair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of age-based discrimination</td>
<td>Job variety</td>
<td>Boss that is respected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging projects</td>
<td>Control over work</td>
<td>Good relationship with manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good working conditions</td>
<td>Opportunity to work in teams</td>
<td>Lack of age-based discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient resources</td>
<td>Broad job scope</td>
<td>Responsibility and authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career development</td>
<td>Feedback and performance review</td>
<td>Opportunity to share knowledge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author.

In summary, the case study participants displayed more of Super’s and Levinson’s traditional career behaviour patterns than behaviours that could be aligned with the boundaryless career construct. Older workers displayed commitment and loyalty through the length of time they have remained with the same employer and through their loyalty to family. Their commitment was demonstrated by their passion towards their work, to their hobbies and other interests.
Older workers as a cohort possess the attributes and learning habits that allow them to make valuable contributions to the twenty-first-century organisation. Organisations that want to optimise the performance of older workers need to implement the workplace environment system prescribed in Table 7.9 above.

Chapter 8 builds completes the implications of this research through its focus on the boundaryless career.
8

Implications for Theory and Practice:
The Boundaryless Career

8.1 Overview

Chapter 7 discussed the contribution that this research makes to the theory and practice surrounding the motivation and aspirations of older workers, and by implication, what de-motivates them. This was achieved through a comparison and analysis of the literature review theory compared to the practice as understood through the case studies that underpin this thesis.

Chapter 8 complements that contribution to knowledge by a focus on the research question – The boundaryless career: is there a disparity between theory, practice and worker desire in relation to older workers? Chapter 8 also contains a discussion on the supplementary questions that led to the research question; the limitations of the study, and recommendations for further research. As well the outcomes of the research are summarised.

The research question and associated questions were known to be complex and ambiguous, potentially more like a ‘frog than a bicycle’ (Mant, 2006). There are two levels of complexity in Mant’s thesis, explained by the fact that a bicycle can be pulled apart and reconstructed to be exactly the same. This is not possible with a frog, which has many living properties and interdependencies which make the frog far more complex than a bicycle. A similar situation has been found to apply to the employment of older workers. There were elements of contradictory and ambiguous behaviours
demonstrated by both Australia Post and its older workers. Australia Post seeks to honour its historic employment commitments, such as its non-retrenchment policies which were developed during more stable times, even though its business environment is changing and its competitors are adopting less paternalistic policies. Australia Post’s older workers have unsuccessfully endeavoured to combat age-related stereotypes and compete with younger workers who generally possess more recent qualifications. Gharajedaghi (2006, p. 51) provided some useful advice on how to think about confused situations like this. His view was that the analysis of the behaviour of a non-linear system is ‘like walking through a maze whose walls rearrange themselves with each step’. Further, he thought that researchers were more likely to be successful in explaining the behaviour of parts of a systems problem by studying the behaviour of the whole, rather than the parts in isolation.

The literature review chapters and data collection and analysis therefore sought to satisfy a whole-of-system approach for understanding the problem of older worker employment, which has been confirmed as being enmeshed in contradiction, ambiguity and self-interest. A deep study of the symptoms of career plateauing, as perceived by the affected worker, served the purpose of applying a microscopic view to the careers and life aspirations of older workers and the potential consequences for business in extending their working lives. This approach has enabled the research question to be dealt with and the core questions concerning the desire and ability of older workers to contribute at a high-performance level to be thought through in a holistic way.

The study of career plateaus enabled a somewhat detached approach to studying the research problem and, as a consequence, it allowed illumination of many contradictory perspectives to the research question to unfold. This led to a gradual funnelling of evidence towards considered outcomes. The research has confirmed that the retention of older workers in a productive capacity is problematic and complex; there are individual differences, but there are clear patterns for organisations and individuals to follow for win/win outcomes that allow satisfaction of organisational performance targets and worker satisfaction.
8.2 Chaotic responses to older worker employment

The complexity discussed above implies that business should adopt a sophisticated approach to the problems associated with the employment of older workers. However, this sophistication appears to be absent, as evidenced by the contradictory business responses to the 2006 Adage survey (Moodie, 2006). The outcomes from this survey suggest that many organisations will remain confused by the impact of demographic change on their business and employment arrangements.

The experience of the French Government in trying to change long-established employment practices, which was outlined in Chapter 1, suggested that this apparent lack of sophistication in thinking might, in fact, mask significant political problems submerged from view. There is likely to be a range of problems driven passionately by a multitude of vested interests, including generational interests.

In a personal communication, Mant (2006) alluded to generational differences in thinking which were likely to provide a part explanation to the lack of clarity in the way that business is responding. Mant said that his frog thesis related to older workers; it ‘implicitly embraces the idea that older people can often see the connections between things but sometimes their [younger] bosses can’t. It’s a capacity thing.’ Mant referred to the work done in partnership by Elliott Jacques and Wilfred Brown, ‘two old codgers who understood most of this stuff and were driven nuts by their incapacity to explain any of it to younger (and stupider) academics’. Kennedy and Da Costa (2006, p. 40) confirmed the confusion and the difficulties inherent in changing behaviours. In their review of recent trends in older worker employment, they noted that there ‘has only been limited evidence of a change of attitudes toward older workers’.

Given the reports of contemporary organisational practice included in this thesis, employers can be expected to continue, at least in the short term, with apparently simplistic, unproductive and confused approaches to the employment of older workers that are based on the assumption that the ageing of the workforce problem looks more like a bicycle than a frog. In further support of the proposition that change will occur slowly, it is important to note that employers have many higher priority concerns that limit their ability to focus on older worker issues. A risk for employers that choose to
adopt simplistic tactical responses to labour supply problems is that, buoyed by the financial incentives offered by government in the form of favourable taxation and superannuation treatment, they and older workers take no action other than to encourage alienated, under-performing older workers to remain longer at work. Such workers have the capacity to become a negative influence on organisational performance, culture and on the career opportunities and productivity of others.

Employers are not the only group that is confused about careers and employment arrangements. There is robust debate amongst academics on whether or not the boundaryless career is a sound career concept, let alone whether it is now the predominant form of new career. Workers are potentially confused by job advertisements announcing the recruiting organisation as ‘an employer of choice’, referring to workers as ‘our people’ or our ‘team members’, and by employment packages and uniforms that tend to tie workers’ minds and hearts to the organisation.

8.3 Questions subsumed within the research question

8.3.1 Overview

A number of supplementary questions informed the development of the research question - The boundaryless career: is there a disparity between theory, practice and desire in relation to older workers? This research has enabled a generalised answer to those questions, which are listed in Chapter 1, Section 4. These questions and answers follow.

8.3.2 Why do older workers want to continue working?

Financial need and a desire for life experience richness are the primary reasons that older workers wish to continue working when they could retire. It has been shown that most older workers have insufficient funds to cater for the increased life expectancy flowing from medical advances. A boy born in 2003-2005 can expect to live 78.5 years, a girl can expect to live 83.3 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).
The potential shortfall in funding for a long retirement is an important consideration for the older worker contemplating retirement. The University of Canberra’s National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling has reported that one in two females aged between forty-five and sixty has $8,000 or less in superannuation, with one in two males having less than $30,700 in superannuation savings. Experts have predicted that a $450,000 investment is required to fund a $45,000 per annum retirement income (Koch, 29 October 2006). These gender differences in superannuation point to a further difference in male and female careers, a point neglected in much of the careers literature including Levinson’s seminal work. Three other differences in the careers of male and female workers were identified in this study – earlier permanent career plateauing; fewer senior positions within the organisation structures and time away from work for rearing children were found to be relevant considerations and differences between typical male and female careers.

The field research has demonstrated that older workers tend to develop portfolio lives, with work forming an important component. Leaving aside the financial attraction of work, it is the mental stimulation, the opportunity for learning and social contact that older workers value.

8.3.3 Can older workers provide high performance and discretionary effort?

The motivation and job design literature has been confirmed by the fieldwork as relevant and important to older worker job performance. This finding enables clarity on what is required for optimum levels of high performance and discretionary effort by older workers.

It is important to note, however, that motivational and job design literature is largely absent from the literature on the boundaryless career construct, despite a great deal of research that has been conducted over many years on the workplace ingredients that motivate workers.

High-performance outcomes are possible in a work environment where organisational systems and management are respectful and non-discriminatory, are participative, where
mature aged workers have challenging and influential job roles that embrace learning, and control over work and the time of work, and where the endeavour is somewhat altruistic in that it serves humanity rather than seeking to undermine it. Time spent in a particular job role should be limited to a maximum of five years.

8.3.4 Are older workers suitable for twenty-first-century work?

The globalisation of organisations is likely to require different skills and attributes in all workers, particularly older workers. Workers will need to take primary responsibility for skill maintenance and relevance and for developing the skills and capacity to cope with greater levels of uncertainty, ambiguity and chaos as organisations deal with increased complexity and various forms of predatory competitor behaviour.

Older workers have been found to possess the non-managerial work skills for the future as prescribed by Business Council of Australia’s research, but the workers in this study were unlikely to possess sufficient desire to seek challenging work in another organisation, nor were they able to conceptualise the work possibilities that existed for them beyond Australia Post. Their existing organisational environment, Australia Post, could be described as paternalistic, with the organisation having the potential to become less so in the short term because of cost pressures and the injection of fresh talent from other commercial enterprises, so the older workers in the study are unlikely to be transformed into high-performance individuals under existing circumstances. Further, the 80% of participants who described themselves as having plateaued are unlikely to have sufficient confidence, skill currency or the requisite unbounded approach to conceptualise new work opportunities much beyond their current experiences.

Work is important for this group of people, but they are often stressed by it and have been for many years. The complementary study of young workers also demonstrated that workers experience stressful conditions at the early stages of their careers, and the interviews with the older workers showed that work can remain stressful throughout the entire working life. Assuming acceptance of the idea that the individual is bounded and the organisation is becoming increasingly unbounded, then this stress and anxiety are likely to increase. The prognosis therefore is that this group of older workers will not
be transformed into high-performance individuals at work; however, they can be expected to remain at Australia Post until they are encouraged to leave or when their personal circumstances allow their retirement. This scenario can be expected to be repeated in subsequent generations unless workers are encouraged into new ways of thinking about skills maintenance and career management, and unless they strive to develop new skills in dealing with ambiguity and conflict.

Implicit in this scenario is the possibility that older workers who do not possess current skills, and are unmotivated, frustrated and even angry, could have a poisonous impact on the workplace culture. They could become blockers to organisational initiatives and to the career aspirations of others – ‘dinosaurs capable of supporting or undermining’ (Case 23). This suggests that organisations need to be wary of omnibus personnel policies that embrace all older workers. It would be much better from the organisations perspective to be selective, to offer extended employment only to those with positive attitudes and valuable skills. This suggests an imperative for organisation’s to be more pro-active in their human resource management of the work and learning environment. As the supply of skilled younger workers contracts, future cohorts of older workers will need to become replacements. The consequences of continued under-utilisation of older workers can be expected to be found in reduced future capacity of the organisation, and is likely to impair future recruitment of skilled workers who will have greater choice of employer than is currently available.

Change at the individual level will also need to be supported by organisational practices and systems that facilitate more frequent job rotation, up-skilling and supportive job design. There are significant challenges for an organisation in initiating and maintaining these changes, with these goals likely to be achieved only when driven by the individual worker supported by directives to management that emanate from the Board of Directors. The extent of change required to current organisational management behaviour and practice should not be underestimated. It suggests a long transition time and will involve significant high-level focus, including attention to organisational structures, job designs and management attitudes and style.

The globalisation of business is a relatively new experience for most organisations and therefore a period of experimentation can be expected to occur. At this early stage, the
differences between a global, boundaryless organisation and the ‘company man’ appear vast, with little compromise apparent in a theoretical sense. Experimentation can be expected to embrace the full spectrum of mercenary behaviour by both boundaryless organisations and their bounded and boundaryless workforces. This hostile environment can be expected to normalise gradually as organisations reflect on the consequences of mercenary behaviour. These consequences could include a lack of attention to quality and a failure of boundaryless workers to care for the interdependencies that are implicit in the whole system. That is, more balanced patterns of behaviour are likely to emerge over time as endeavours are made to increase the extent of common ground between the worker and the organisation; participative management practices tend to facilitate a coming together of such opposites.

8.3.5 Is the boundaryless career an attractive proposition for older workers?

The boundaryless career as the predominant form of new career, as asserted by Rousseau (1995), cannot be supported by the literature review and case study research conducted for this thesis. Only one of the forty case study participants had undertaken a career that could be viewed as boundaryless. Nevertheless most, if not all, lived portfolio lives which comprised many activities and, to that extent, their lives embraced some of the attributes of boundarylessness. Regardless, the participants displayed limited capacity or interest in pursuing a boundaryless career late in their working lives.

The evidence from this research suggests that a boundaryless career is not attractive to older workers who have not previously participated in such a career as the predominant characteristic of their working life. That is, it is unlikely to be attractive to an older worker who has remained with a single employer for long time spans. On the other hand, an older professional actor would presumably not have difficulty with continuing a boundaryless career. The older worker ‘company man’ s’ lack of attraction to a boundaryless career is likely to be given added impetus by inadequate personal financial security, lack of skill currency, and the desire to pursue other interests such as family, hobbies and community service. From the employer perspective, the offer of a boundaryless career to the current cohort of older worker produces a risk that the
employer will potentially recruit a number of disassociated and disruptive individuals with limited skills currency.

Importantly however, a boundaryless career does offer the prospect of liberation to the plateaued older worker who has the confidence, skills and enthusiasm to take control of the work aspect of their life. It can provide relief to structural and content career plateaus. This view is consistent with the portfolio lives that older workers tend to develop over time and therefore the portfolio life could provide a stimulus for a fundamental shift in thinking about employment relationships.

8.3.6 Does the ‘company man’ continue to exist?

Although this study found support for the theory that the ‘company man’ era has ended because organisations can no longer provide employment certainty, the study also found strong ‘company man’ behaviours and desires among the case study participants. There is no doubt that the ‘company man’ continues to exist at Australia Post, which seeks to encourage that level of commitment.

The long tenure of employment and the emotional attachment to the organisation displayed by participants at interview all attest to the desire for a sense of belonging and contribution that attaches to the ‘company man’ construct. The removal of this aspiration would appear to be problematic, as people tend to join organisations for more than financial reward. The high level of interest in contributing to society during retirement that was expressed by the older workers indicated a level of altruism that would likely be lacking in a boundaryless career. Whilst it was clear that older workers live ‘portfolio lives’ as envisaged by Handy (1989), the dominance of work over the rest of their lives as implied by the boundaryless career is likely to be resisted by most older workers, for that life-dominating reason alone.

8.3.7 The organisation as a parent: an obsolete metaphor?

Traditionally, ‘company man’ workers have tended to see their employer as a parent with an expectation that the organisation would protect them and their interests in return for their loyalty. The simplicity of this model can be seen to have been overshadowed in recent times by harsher business conditions driven by improved global
communications, including the internet, and by global equity finance provided by superannuation funds and others with large amounts of capital to invest in business, both in Australia and globally. These funds are often provided in a schizophrenic way by the same older worker ‘company man’, who seeks short-term profit from investments whilst simultaneously seeking more humane, longer-term treatment in their own employment. Investors and their investment managers have been widely reported to pressure organisations in which they have invested to reduce costs and produce increased dividends and profits, whilst the organisation is simultaneously buffeted by competitor behaviour and its own internal problems. This combination creates an unstable, unpredictable and boundaryless organisational environment that tends to minimise the available time and effort that the organisation has for giving attention to the needs of its staff, at an individual level. The circle is not virtuous!

This increasingly boundaryless organisational environment stands in contrast to the current expectations, skills and aspirations of its more bounded, older ‘company man’ workers. Over time, organisations are likely to institutionalise changes in employment arrangements that more closely align with its operating realities, causing the end of the ‘company man’ construct and the escalation of the boundaryless career. It is possible to understand the Australian Government’s Work Choices legislation as encouraging that direction.

Australia Post remains largely stable and continues to be successful as it participates in its global markets. It continues to produce record year on year profits and remains a large government business enterprise with some monopoly protection from competition and some global protection derived from its membership of the Universal Postal Union (a specialised agency of the United Nations), and it gains protection from the high costs of competitor entry to the core business. In these circumstances, the conditions necessary to force the adoption by the organisation of the serious consequences of a boundaryless career do not exist at present. Nevertheless, the organisation appears to be in transition towards a boundaryless organisation and displays many of its characteristics. It competes in global markets, outsources non-core work and focuses on cost reduction through many avenues, including giving close attention to its supply
chains. The behaviour of Australia Post’s workers is consistent with literature – job satisfiers remain important to them, job tenure increases as they age, and the effort devoted to formal skill development diminishes with age. These patterns appear broadly consistent with patterns reported in Australian and international literature.

Figure 6.3 illustrates that Australia Post has an age profile older than the average demographic spread in Australian businesses. The current stability could be challenged by the new recruits who replace those retiring, by new direction from the top management of the organisation, and by cost reduction necessitated by changed business circumstances. By way of comparison and example, personal observation of the age demographic of the Coles Group Limited (formerly Coles Myer) staff at its Tooronga headquarters, indicates that it is considerably younger than Australia Post’s staff profile. Coles Group has been subjected to a number of restructures over recent years, and towards the end of the 2006 calendar year the organisation began reducing its head office staff by one-third, at least in part a response to an attempted buyout by the private equity organisation, Kohlberg Kravis Roberts. The circumstances of these staff appear far less comfortable than those of the Australia Post staff and many of the Coles Group staff look as though they are being pushed into a boundaryless career by a boundaryless and more chaotic organisation than is Australia Post. Two people in the Australia Post sample had experienced the Coles Group type of employment experience; they disliked the experience of retrenchment intensely, and have found in the stability and favourable attitudes to staff at Australia Post something to cherish. These two people, like the other thirty-eight of the case study participants, demonstrated the desire for satisfaction of human needs as envisaged by Maslow and many other scholars.

It can be concluded from this discussion that the ‘company man’ construct is possibly phasing out of existence and that not everybody will willingly embrace a boundaryless career. In time, it seems that many workers will have little choice about taking a more pro-active approach to preparing for a boundaryless career as organisations are forced into radical structural change involving staff reduction.
8.4 Conclusions about the boundaryless career construct

8.4.1 Overview

Whilst this study does not offer support to the theory that the boundaryless career is the predominant form of new career for the current cohort of older workers, it does not criticise the construct as an indicator of the future. The construct appears, to this researcher, to be an emergent theory that endeavours to explain current changes occurring to global organisations and what those changes might mean for employment practices.

The research concluded that the current cohort of older workers was unlikely to embrace a boundaryless career. This is partly because the desire of the current cohort of older workers is to continue to be ‘company men’. Other reasons include commitments to family and other interests, and the difficulty they have in regard to the breaking of embedded thinking and behavioural patterns.

Nevertheless, there are many pressures on older workers to extend their working lives, and, over time, older workers may have little choice other than to pursue boundaryless careers. Reasons for extended working lives could include insufficient retirement savings, government incentives to encourage continued working, prospective labour shortages and a longer and healthy life expectancy that would need to be filled with interesting activity.

8.4.2 Conflicting views on the validity of the boundaryless career construct

It has been observed that recent careers literature has become more critical of the boundaryless career construct, citing many shortcomings, and there is debate amongst economists on whether or not job tenure and security has decreased in recent years. Despite these obvious shortcomings and the accompanying debate, there are societal trends suggesting that the boundaryless career may transition to become the predominant form of career at some time in the future. There are many potential drivers of such an outcome, and some have been discussed above. Others drivers could include the desire of workers to clear Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) debt
incurred in gaining their education, to better utilise their education and skills, and to
gain new life experiences.

It is worth reflecting on the possibility and implications of Drucker (1999, p. 46) being
correct in predicting that within the next twenty to thirty years, people in all developed
countries will be working until they are seventy-nine years old. If this situation did
eventuate, people not pursuing boundaryless careers and who continued to adopt current
job retention and learning practices could expect others to control their fate for most of
their working lives. A review of the frustrations expressed by the plateaued case study
participants contained in the appendices allows an appreciation of the potential
consequences for older workers with vastly extended career plateaus. It is, however,
more likely that they will not have the opportunity to extend their employment beyond
the traditional retirement age.

The boundaryless career construct has also been challenged by some scholars as being
unsubstantiated by empirical research, certainly outside of the USA (Dany, Mallon &
Arthur, 2003), and is plagued by other practical problems that include the high cost of
replacement of departing boundaryless workers in an era of increasing shortages in the
supply of skilled labour. ‘Employer of choice’ is still included in job advertisements, for
example: ‘Our client, an ASX top employer of choice’ (The Age, 2006). Shortages of
skilled labour throughout the developed world are leading organisations to take special
steps to retain staff. Indications are that organisations are providing incentives that go
beyond income, which has long been regarded by industrial psychologists as a short-
term motivator. ‘The problem with financial incentives is that the effect wares off
quickly and you cannot keep giving more and more money’ (Chandler 2000). The
recruitment cost of replacing staff, and the lead time before they become effective,
are further arguments against the take-up, by organisations, of the radically new idea of
boundaryless career.

Not only do many scholars challenge the boundaryless career through their view that it
is unsupported by empirical evidence, but other career theorists appear to disregard it as
a valid consideration, choosing not to use the term in their literature (Arthur, Khapova
& Wilderom, 2005).
Sound empirical evidence is likely to be difficult to gather. Careers do not stand alone; they involve partners and family and other interests, opportunities and constraints. Nevertheless, careers are a personal and individual journey – a journey that is buffeted and diverted along the way by a variety of experiences and constraints. Careers vary by industry, discipline, locality, technology, business pressures, needs, desires. There are cross-impacts which add to the complexity, as demonstrated by this study of career plateaus and the difficulties of interpreting perceptions of individual realities and circumstances. The variables suggest that multi-disciplinary approaches are needed to understand new careers, and the research to date appears limited in this regard. Perhaps the best outcome will be from snapshots taken in many organisational settings, at different times. The contribution of this research could be seen in that light, as contributing to collective insight that has already begun to be established by other researchers.

The number of variables in careers, combined with the rate of change across the business and societal issues that impact careers, makes it difficult to imagine the boundaryless career ever being supported by sufficient up-to-date data to support uniform agreement that it is the new form of career. The devil appears to be in the detail, and changed personal and business circumstances can rapidly change that detail. For these reasons, it is possible that career trends will always rely on researchers observing patterns and theorising about them. In this context, there will always be gaps in the body of knowledge and room for debate, and for alternative theories of perceived reality.

The quality of data underpinning findings on careers is also likely to be open to debate on what has been included and what has not been included. An example might involve the data supporting statements that USA workers experience ten employers on average and Japanese workers will work for six employers during their working life. Such data would likely benefit from deep analysis that would include: a clear picture of the characteristics of the workers in the study and whether they equated to subjects of earlier studies; whether the data included multiple churn through particular classes of jobs; whether age, gender and ethnicity impacted the findings; and whether there was anything else significant but not seen by the researcher and therefore not included in the data set.
Some researchers have concluded that some of the seminal work on careers was flawed by small sample sizes; some early researchers assumed that women’s careers were the same as men’s careers. This supports the scepticism of this researcher that there are just too many variables needing to be understood before a statement that the boundaryless career is now the predominant form of career can be confirmed as factual.

### 8.4.3 The relationship of the boundaryless career to traditional views of work satisfiers

It appears that the boundaryless career has been conceived as a way of explaining employment practices associated with new forms of business process and associated work organisation. Even though the literature on boundaryless careers is silent on motivational theory and the arguments neglect discussion on the place of traditional motivational theory within the boundaryless career, it is not difficult to imagine a person with unique, high-demand skills constructing boundaryless opportunities that provide personal satisfaction and satisfy the work motivators. On the other hand, the fieldwork associated with this thesis has found that current older workers continue to be motivated in the way understood by Maslow, and that they gain job satisfaction through the job design principles of the likes of Hackman and Oldham. With possibly one exception, the older workers in this sample could not be described as having rare and unique skills, and did not possess an aptitude to use their skills in a boundaryless career way.

Indications are that a boundaryless career will not be the choice of older workers in the short term. Possibilities for them are bounded by history, societal attitudes, employer behaviours and their own rich portfolio lives. A boundaryless career would, in all likelihood, appear narrow and unrewarding for them. Caring responsibilities alone would rule it out for many; others are weary through the workplace stress they have experienced over the years.

But, desires and plans change. Recent trends are showing that older Australian workers are beginning to extend their working lives from age fifty-five to sixty, demonstrating that time-honoured behaviours might change as government, employers and individuals act on skilled labour shortages and the opportunities that come to older workers from being the future labour supply. ‘Australians are increasingly giving up on early
retirement’ (Davis, 2006). Davis, a journalist, quoted an analysis of labour force statistics by the Reserve Bank of Australia as showing a ‘significant rise in workforce participation rates among people aged between 55 and 64 years of age during the last five years’. This has been stimulated by government incentive to remain at work rather than retire, or perhaps the publicity surrounding the combined consequences of longer life spans and insufficient retirement savings is beginning to impact retirement decisions.

This research found that older workers currently live portfolio lives and they gain a good deal of pleasure from that approach. Their aspirations for the future confirmed their desire to continue to live that way. The research also suggested altruistic aspirations beyond current levels, and quite contrary to the empty raincoat metaphor for working life (Handy, 1995). The discussions on participants’ work experiences displayed hostility to the ‘empty raincoat’ conditions that many felt they were enduring at work. The portfolio approach to life is more holistic than a boundaryless career and potentially more satisfying to the older worker. The implication of a boundaryless career is that it stands alone; it is the core and other things fit in, if they can.

Whilst changes to business structures, such as the establishment of technology parks, global communication options, alliances and joint ventures, suggest a more mobile workforce than in the past, it is unclear whether these developments will spark a radical shift in worker or employer behaviour towards boundaryless careers in the near future.

Further, today there is more variety in most aspects of life than in the past, and arguably a greater need for more people with specialised skills to manage and develop that diversity. There is arguably a reducing requirement for generalist management and supervisory positions in organisations, as a consequence of delayering within organisations and because supervisory functions are being incorporated into team roles. These changes do not necessarily translate into boundaryless careers, because they suggest firm or technology-specific skills that may be quite unique.

The contradictions and gaps in the theory compared with practice, combined with the newness of the boundaryless construct, allow the conclusion that a considerable gap exists between the theory and the practice of organisations, and the desires of older
workers, with regard to the assertion that the boundaryless career is the predominant form of new career.

8.4.4 The boundaryless career as a way of thinking about employability and job satisfaction

Currently, the definitions of the ‘boundaryless career’ are imprecise and vague. Some careers could always have been described as ‘boundaryless’, for example, careers as a contract merchant seaman, plumber, specialist accountant, consultant. However, definitional vagueness may be appropriate and realistic, because the variety of organisational responses to the specific challenges encountered suggests that a broad descriptor may make definitional precision impossible, and unnecessary.

The benefit of the boundaryless career construct may prove to be in the useful way it encourages unrestricted thinking, by an individual, about their lifetime employability prospects. Working lives in organisations are becoming increasingly boundaryless because of the many side effects of globalisation. The construct of the boundaryless career is therefore supported by this researcher. As with most new ideas, there are early adopters, with the rest of the working population choosing not to adopt the new for a variety of reasons. The construct may only be applicable to younger workers who have more time and more incentive to transition than do older workers. The older workers were found generally not to have the desire, skills currency, confidence or need to disrupt their lives through a boundaryless career, given the job security that they currently enjoyed. These older workers had other incentives to remain with their current employer, including family commitments, a good superannuation scheme and, in some cases, a company car. Further, they had dreams for the future that did not include placing employment at the centre of their existence. The following quotation provides some support for this approach by older workers.
Properly balanced, the Second Age is the time of one’s major contribution, to work or home or community. The Third Age is the opportunity to be someone different, if we want to be; or to go on doing what we used to, only slower... By the time we die, most of us have only discovered one-quarter of what we are capable of doing and being; this is the age to find the missing three-quarters’.


The boundaryless career construct can be seen to make sense when considered through the lens of the rapid growth of choice flowing from technological innovation and globalisation and higher levels of education attainment of workers. Longer and healthier life spans also provide an opportunity for people to capitalise on choice later in life, and the risks can be managed when the individual has options and possibilities provided by financial security. In these circumstances, the older worker can be expected to embrace only what they want to, and under the conditions that suit them.

There was a small number of people in the case study group who clearly had rare and unique skills, and the contacts and confidence to fulfil a boundaryless role. However, these individuals appeared to have little desire for such a career move so late in their working life. Other participants did not have rare and unique skills and appeared to have been worn down by job pressures over the years, including by those pressures that flowed from passive job roles and from the boredom deriving from excessive job tenure. This situation suggests a need for a greater career management focus to mitigate job powerlessness and excessive job tenure and its debilitating consequences. The boundaryless career construct may be useful in providing a greater clarity to that focus.

The boundaryless career construct is also useful when considered as an employment extreme. It seems that one way to break out of a pattern of thinking is to think about extremes. Seen in this light, the boundaryless career provides a way of conceptualising the future of work and life. It accords with a general and continuing trend whereby business and government policies and directions are shifting responsibility and accountability from the organisation to the individual. Examples of this transfer of responsibility include the shift to defined benefit superannuation, which replaces
defined contribution schemes and in so doing shifts superannuation management responsibility from the employer to the employee; Work Choices legislation, which according to the union movement unfairly shifts the balance of power to the employer at the expense of the employee; and the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), which shifts the cost of higher education to the student and away from the community.

Whilst there has been organised resistance to the Work Choice legislative changes, this resistance appears to have had limited impact on employer behaviour. In terms of a boundaryless organisation in a turbulent environment, the union movement could be seen as the kindly but out-of-touch uncle endeavouring to protect a vulnerable nephew against the real world. In combination, these trends all point to a growing tendency for the individual rather than the employer to assume responsibility for the provision of the individual’s essentials for living. The growth of single-person households can be seen as another trend towards the individual and away from community.

Given these quite fundamental and general shifts in responsibilities and accountabilities, the boundaryless career construct could be useful to an individual worker as a way of thinking about their career opportunities and vulnerabilities – a type of personal dashboard metric or key performance indicator for focus, monitoring and reflection about their current situation compared against potential situations. This would provide the individual with a constant reminder of a potentially worst case scenario and could encourage greater control and decision-making in respect of their own career rather than allowing that responsibility to be held by the employer, as has been the tradition. In this way, the individual would be in control and empowered rather than leaving control and power with the employer. The careers literature is silent on these more subtle benefits of the boundaryless career construct.

Boundaryless careers are also thought to be a useful way of encouraging workers to consider their career and skill maintenance in different ways. The era when formal education ended for workers at approximately age twenty-five, and workers remained in their jobs indefinitely, is likely to end. Job tenure trends shown in Chapter 1 indicate that workers are at risk of content plateauing from age thirty. These practices do not support career enhancement and boundaryless career options. The potential impact of
skill loss is demonstrated in Table 8.1 below. The skills on the vertical axis decline over time as learning reduces, whilst skill acquisition increases as learning increases, as indicated on the horizontal axis.

Table 8.1: Skills and the learning older worker

Worker aged 40+ who keeps learning

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<tr>
<th>Worker aged 40+ who stops learning</th>
<th>Skills</th>
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Perhaps the greatest benefit that the boundaryless career can offer an individual is as an internal locus of control over their working life. This control provides a sense of well-being that is denied the plateaued individual who is not in control of decisions that effect them, who is subjected to real or perceived age-based discrimination and stereotyping, and who is locked into a job that has become frustrating and boring. A boundaryless career offers the skilled individual personal control over work, including time for other interests, continuous learning, and the elimination of the adverse effects of career plateaus.

In summary, the boundaryless career provides a useful avenue for thinking about career management because it encourages a wider breadth of thinking about what an individual has to offer and what they might achieve and enjoy in their careers. Further, ‘boundaryless’ serves to describe the increasingly unstructured world of business as it is continuously buffeted by competitors, technology and investors. Given the dynamics of modern business, it seems likely that the relatively small numbers of people currently undertaking boundaryless careers will grow, but this will require future generations of workers to manage their careers differently. Perhaps the most important possibility arising from the boundaryless career is the control that passes to the older worker – control over job, and the elimination of the undesirable features of structural and job content plateauing.
8.5 Conclusions about the research problem

Research problem: *The boundaryless career: is there a disparity between theory, practice and worker desire in relation to older workers?*

The study concluded that there is considerable disparity between theory, practice and desire of older workers and the boundaryless career construct as the dominant form of new career. It found that there is a fundamental tension between the older worker’s need to be the centre of attention of an organisation, and the business reality that requires organisations to focus on the economics of outputs with the individual at the periphery of organisational concern.

The environmental conditions which lead to employee satisfaction at work have been known for many years, with large bodies of research all pointing in the same direction. This study has supported the conclusion of others that autonomy, variety, learning, feedback, respect, wholeness and meaning, and a desirable future are important to older workers. However, the relative priorities of intrinsic motivators may change with age, and this may encourage some older workers with rare and valuable skills to try something different. A boundaryless career could provide that opportunity for them. Others with less in-demand skills and insufficient finances to allow them to eliminate work from their portfolio of activities will likely seek to hold onto their current employment arrangements.

The individual-centric views discussed above are at odds with the primary task of organisations to be successful through the production of goods and services, at lowest possible cost in a highly competitive and often chaotic global market place. Employers are driven by the interests of owners to provide shareholder value, sustain and grow the business and drive costs down; these are the realities of business confronting unskilled older workers who need to continue working. Employers have at their disposal a range of labour supply choices that span permanent employees to contactors and sub-contractors, and the outsourcing to other countries for the supply of labour and services.
Work has been found to be important to most older workers. Most are passionate about work, even when they find it a less than perfect experience. They are critical of age-based stereotyping and discrimination, which they believe limits their job rotation opportunities for greater job variety and challenge, reduces learning opportunities, career development, equity and respect. Older worker criticism of their workplace relates to their personal circumstances; their relationship with their supervisor/manager rather than the organisational in general. Because there are many individuals, and there are many managers and supervisors, this a difficult matter for the organisation to address.

Older workers are clearly willing to work and seek to perform above their current level which in all but a few cases was sub-optimal. Australia Post, on the other hand, had demonstrated little commitment to its older workers other than to continue to employ them. By this behaviour, Australia Post mirrored the global organisation. One possible reason for this approach is that it was just too difficult to create optimal work environments for the older worker cohort. This might be because of higher-level, more immediate business priorities, such as revenue growth, cost containment and competitive pressures. There is also the organisational need to consider other cohorts, such as disadvantaged groups and young graduates.

Older workers are clear about what they want from work, even if it is somewhat secondary in importance to some of them. The highest numbers of participants expressed interest in learning followed by serving the community, a desire for part-time rather than full-time work, role change and challenge. The full listing can be found in Table 7.8

8.6 Key policy and practice implications

The research has found that there has been no substantive public debate through the business media about individual and organisational responsibility and accountability for optimising the contribution that older workers are capable of making. The public debate has been directed at government intervention in the progressively worsening shortage of skilled labour by providing more places at learning institutions.
The two principal implications for policy and practice from this research concern the need for workers to maintain their skills currency over their entire working lives and a requirement for the creation and maintenance of a complementary organisational environment. There are joint employee and employer responsibilities for both, and they represent significant change to current practice. Effective intervention will require a new focus on skills and a greater focus on management style. A sophisticated change management strategy that is driven from the top of the organisation and is encouraged by government will be essential for change to occur.

It has been estimated that the lost contribution of older workers is substantial. Narrow and shallow job designs have been demonstrated to demotivate older workers, and discourage learning and personal growth. Excessive job tenure causes learning to decline to levels that are unacceptable to the worker, and this should be unacceptable to employers as well. Continuous job tenure seems to become a problem somewhere between three-and-a-half and five years in a job. The pattern of people ceasing their formal education at age twenty-five needs to be broken so that they maintain technical skills currency in a world that is subject to rapid change. For individuals, this will mean ongoing attention to skill development and job changes every three to five years. For organisations, it will mean the elimination of age discrimination and stereotyping; inculcating an organisation-wide participative management culture; encouraging ongoing learning for all workers; and facilitating job rotation opportunities. All represent significant challenges for organisations.

Older workers articulated a clear desire for reasonable control over how their work was done, together with a strong desire for ongoing learning and stimulation at work, and in life. They also desired respect at work from their supervisors and managers. Satisfaction of these desires will require supervision that is sufficiently confident and competent to facilitate ever-increasing levels of decision content into workers’ jobs. This represents a significant challenge for organisations and leadership, as the evidence is that these leadership traits are in short supply.

The study has demonstrated that a lack of organisational and individual attention to environmental and skill issues has not been a new phenomenon. These are
time-honoured practices embedded within wider societal attitudes. The implication is that changes to the workplace customs and practices as they relate to older workers will be very difficult to effect. It also means that if change does not occur, then future generations will continue the current patterns of behaviour. Because these issues are not being discussed, the first step in a national change strategy would be the provision of insight to the broad community initiated and maintained by government and business.

8.7 Limitations of the study

Unlike other large and successful Australian organisations, Australia Post has not been fundamentally restructured in the past ten years to the extent that people have been retrenched or required to re-apply for employment in a new organisation structure. Nevertheless, it does operate in a competitive and global market and Australia Post demonstrates many similarities with other organisations, in Australia and internationally.

Whilst much modernisation has occurred, workers have been given undertakings that they would not lose their jobs because of these initiatives. Australia Post has maintained a policy of no forced retrenchment and this has had the effect of limiting the turnover of staff. This environment encourages ‘company man’ attitudes and behaviours that can be seen in the long employment histories of most case study participants. This is an important difference between Australia Post and many other organisations that use restructure and turnover as a mechanism for renewal.

Case study research can provide a deep understanding of the experiences, observations, attitudes, aspirations and frustrations of individual participants. However, case studies, like other methodologies, can be seen as only valid for a snapshot in time, and the quality of the insight from the snapshots is limited by the number and nature of participants, and the abilities of the research analyst. Supplementary studies using different methodologies such as story-telling, and continuous review of the business newspapers, particularly the Australian Financial Review, were undertaken to complement these snapshots as a part remedy to this limitation.

Another limitation was that the research was conducted within a single organisation and, even though the researcher gained some confidence in the generalisability of
conclusions from the research of others, the broadly consistent patterns between Australia Post and other organisations as captured by the Australian Bureau of Statistics surveys shown in chapter 1, together with discussions at conferences and from the above newspaper reports, he does wonder about potential differences between industries, organisations and technical disciplines given the extent of the diversity and interdependencies. Accordingly, replicating studies conducted in other organisations where staffing and business patterns appear less predictable than Australia Post are recommended in Chapter 8.8. Such organisations would likely display different age profiles, more mobile employees, more rapid technological and product change cycles and a less paternalistic management culture than Australia Post.

The most significant limitation is thought to be the absence of the psychological assessment of the potential impact that anxiety might have on an older worker undertaking a boundaryless career. This researcher does not possess the technical expertise to conduct such a study, which is likely to warrant a thesis in its own right. Accordingly, anxiety and the boundaryless career has been included as an issue recommended for further study.

8.8 Recommendations for further research

Another way of gaining insight into the preparedness and suitability of an individual for a boundaryless career could be to apply Porter’s competitive advantage strategies for a business, to an individual (Porter, 1998, pp. 153-163). Participants in the study could be asked to describe how they would differentiate themselves in the career market. The analysis could focus on what is unique about them in their existing job role, or in an extended value chain activity. By way of example, a person describing themselves as a dancer would appear to be more bounded than the same person describing themselves as a performer. A recruiter is more constricting than the same person describing themself as a specialist in human capital solutions. An analysis of the descriptors used would likely be insightful, particularly if combined with other employment characteristics such as job tenure, job roles and qualifications.

Complementary studies that applied positivist survey research would enhance the body of knowledge, as would the application and integration of comparative research.
There are six research questions recommended for further study.

There was a suggestion from the case study analysis that the possession of computer literacy might be a protection against career plateauing and this could represent a worthwhile topic for research. Computing is subject to rapid change as new possibilities evolve from new software and from up-graded hardware. This could be seen to provide challenge and ongoing learning. It was noted that of the people identifying as non-plateaued, six worked in the Information Technology Division or on information technology-related work.

A second further research recommendation concerns the determination of the financial cost of the lost potential of employee stagnation. The attribution of the cost of global warming by the Stern Committee provides a fine example of the stimulus for action created by a well-crafted case that includes a cost-benefit analysis. It is possible that organisations will act on the waste of the potential of older workers if the costs of worker stagnation are known, published and widely debated.

A third area of focus involves the implications of boundaryless careers for the body of knowledge and benefits that have been found to surround historic workplace motivation principles and their embodiment in job design and employee participation.

The fourth area of recommended future work draws on a finding from a supplementary study that highly skilled Information Technology Division specialists lost their desire for maintaining leading edge skills at approximately thirty years of age. By that time, these skilful workers reported that they had tired of the stress that accompanied leading edge projects, that they had a desire to establish family and other important personal relationships, and that the remuneration system encouraged a career in management over a specialist technical career. The study would consider whether the boundaryless career is only suitable to particular age cohorts.

The fifth study recognises that a lack of boundaries, with excessive ambiguity, could create great stress and anxiety at a time when older workers have already experienced many years of work-related stress. A number of participants in the study mentioned that
they had an ambition to lower their work stress level. It is possible that a psychological study into anxiety and the boundaryless career could result in a finding that unacceptable levels of anxiety would be sufficient to prevent all but a few older workers from seeking a boundaryless career.

Finally, replicating studies in other organisations are recommended. The purpose of such studies being to gather insight into the extent that the workplace experiences of older workers in other types of organisations, particularly those with less stable environments and less paternalistic management cultures, mirror the experiences and desires of the Australia Post employees who volunteered for this study.

8.9 Conclusion

This thesis sought to test the attractiveness of the boundaryless career construct to older workers employed in the national headquarters of Australia Post. The basis of this focus was that many workplace researchers claimed that the boundaryless career was the emerging and predominant form of new career. The objective was to test the suitability and implications of this form of career, which is driven by the impact of globalisation on organisations, against government intentions to encourage older workers to remain at work beyond traditional retirement ages. The study of the boundaryless career enabled an informed opinion on the implications for business and individuals of extended working lives.

The conclusion is that the boundaryless career is not attractive to most older workers. Older workers are social beings, often with strong needs for belonging and affiliating. It may be more realistic to view individuals and organisations as being within the normal curve. There are cohorts at the leading and trailing edge, but most are in the middle. Perhaps it is the relatively few people at the leading and trailing edges who aspire to the boundaryless career?

The study was set against a well-documented background of age-based discrimination and stereotypes that impacted the recruitment, promotion, training and departure from organisations of older workers throughout the Australian and international economy.
The comparison between organisational theory and practice compared individual case studies in one organisation, Australia Post, with global theory and practice about workers and the organisations that employ them. The strength of the similarities of the Australia Post and its staff with global practice enables a broad statement that the findings may be relevant to other organisations.

Whilst the boundaryless career is not attractive to many older workers because of the organisational focus on cost reduction that is implicit in the boundaryless career construct, and the lack of attention to the motivational factors that are important to workers, it is likely that over time there will be a greater merging of the interests of organisations and workers. It is significant that older workers in retirement seek to make contributions to community rather than to the more profit-focused objectives of business.

Organisations and older workers themselves were found to be confused by the impact of demographic change on an often chaotic business environment, and how to respond to government encouragement to extend the working lives of older workers. There is much evidence that the long-established worker dependency on their employer continues, as does the expectation, and belief, that the organisation will reward them for their ‘company man’ loyalty by displaying parent-like behaviour towards the workforce. Continuance of this attitude will cause problems as the global organisation is increasingly unable to satisfy this worker expectation.

The boundaryless career is expected, by its proponent researchers, to cause the demise of the ‘company man’ with the loss of the mutual loyalty that accompanies that notion. The sentiments that are embraced by the ‘company man’ were found to exist in large measure in the case study participants, providing further support to the finding that a boundaryless career is unlikely to find favour with the current cohort of older workers.

There is a clear pattern of under-utilisation of older worker capacity, despite shortfalls in the supply of skilled labour and the reality that work is very important – sometimes even central - to older workers. Older worker frustration at non-inclusive systems, and autocratic management approaches, reinforce their experience of alienation at work.
The term ‘career plateau’ was used by many study participants to describe what they regarded as the realities of their work situation. Plateau was determined by lack of opportunity for progression, for learning and excessive job tenure, which appears to have the characteristic of reducing opportunities for new learning. This contrasts with very strong desires by older workers for continuous learning opportunities. The male career trajectory was found to plateau on average at age fifty, and for women ten years earlier, and there were clear differences in male and female careers.

Career plateau was found to be an imprecise construct, subject to both employer and employee perceptions that may be incorrect. It can become self-fulfilling in terms of career development and worker performance and is likely to lead to a profound under-utilisation of older worker potential. The disaggregation of career plateaus into structural, content and personal plateaus was also problematic. The literature on structural plateau relates to hierarchy, and it was found that organisation structure does limit opportunities because of a lack of higher-level positions to which to aspire. This is exacerbated as hierarchical structures collapse in favour of flatter, less permanent structures, however there are many positions available to people through horizontal career moves. Workers should see this as a satisfactory alternative to the traditional vertical advancement. The problem is that upwards still represents promotion, sideways equals plateaus in many minds. Nevertheless, promotion is not important to most older workers and older workers and organisations should focus on the management of content plateaus.

A lateral career move brings with it new learning opportunities which can negate ‘content plateauing’. However, job rotations are difficult to arrange without a ‘spill and fill’ approach to organisational renewal and a spill and fill strategy can be disruptive in terms of time taken for people to become proficient in their new roles. Nevertheless there is evidence that Australia Post’s job occupancy has become too static; and there is evidence that this pattern is generally followed by organisations throughout Australia. The study supported the views of Bardwick (1986) that content plateauing can be felt by the individual when they believe they have mastered their job and they have no more to learn, and this occurs between two-and-a-half and five years in the same job.
Personal plateauing was found to be difficult to identify with certainty as it seemed to require in-depth knowledge of the individual worker by an analyst with psychotherapy type expertise. This type of analysis is not normally well supported by an organisation’s human resource professionals, as it is not consistent with the core tasks of a business.

A boundaryless career offers a skilled worker a means of reducing the incidence of, and the negative consequences that attach to, a permanent career plateau. Although such a career is difficult for a worker to envisage after a long working life of stability, it does provide an avenue for placing the worker in control – a situation that does not exist for the older worker who is plateaued and subjected to age-based discrimination and stereotyping.

The study concluded that older workers displayed the learning behaviours of lifelong learners. They possessed the attributes of the future workforce as outlined by the Business Council of Australia and by other researchers of the workplace. Older workers are able to make relevant contributions to the work of the twenty-first-century organisation, if they want to.

Both organisations and individuals pay little attention to career development, which when combined with age-based discriminatory practices and systems leads to a significant under-utilisation of older workers. To avoid future generations of workers following the employment experiences of today’s older workers, they should be encouraged to pro-actively manage their employability throughout their entire career; beginning with their early twenties through to post-sixty retirement. Workers will need to pay particular attention to skills currency and be aware that more than five years tenure in a particular job is likely to reduce their opportunities for new learning.

This research has found that demographic change provides a logical argument for fundamental changes to established patterns of behaviour by both employing organisations and individuals. Changes involve challenges to traditional attitudes towards older workers, skills maintenance, career progression and the nature of careers. The need for change has been strongly linked to national GDP. Nevertheless, there are
powerful competing interests involved that embrace the competing needs and visions of different generations and interest groups. This is likely to result in much confusion, and even conflict amongst stakeholders, and this will necessitate ongoing research, sound change management strategies by both government and business, and a long period of transition.
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APPENDIX 1

EXAMPLES OF WORK-LIFE CHARTS
CAREER STAGES

Growth in Personal Development

Start of work 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50

<-- Years at Work -->
CAREER STAGES

Growth in personal development

Start of work

Years at Work

5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40 45 50

Age
APPENDIX 2

KEY FEATURES OF WORK-LIFE CHARTS
### Key Features of Work-life Charts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case No</th>
<th>Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Steady upward growth until age 40 when career began a steady decline which has continued for 15 years. Clear differentiation between personal growth and growth in the job. Personal growth has continued upward despite downward direction at work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Steady growth in personal development from age 16 to early 30s when a decline began. The decline has continued for approximately 18 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>After an initial spurt in personal development of approximately 3 years, plateauing is evident at various times throughout a career that spans 30 years. The chart shows an upward positive direction. This person has worked in a number of organisations and his drawing reflects the ups and downs of his experiences in each.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Chart is a straight line upwards for the first 30 years of his career, with plateaus being shown after that time, although his career direction is still shown as positive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Steady personal growth for the first 20 years of his career, followed by a very steep decline, then a period of growth that is at a lower level than previously attained. This is followed by another steady decline which is now reversing to a positive direction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>A fluctuating drawing with large highs and lows shown throughout her career. The highs are related to new jobs and more positive staffing changes and the lows are described as ‘issues at work – which got worse’, and personal crisis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Two lines are shown. A personal development plan is a straight line in a positive direction. The line below is a career line which features a severe career plateau early in his career, a positive job change, followed by plateaus then periods of growth in new jobs. For several years now he has plateaued.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>This chart shows rapid personal development during the first 10 years of his career followed by continued personal development but at a lesser rate. Two periods of plateauing are shown. The first one at 20 years into his career and the second one commencing at 40 years into his career and still continuing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The first 12 years of his career show sustained personal growth. That trend is then reversed into a decline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>This career is shown as a series of steps. Each step denotes a new job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>This is an undulating line showing a decline early on in his career, a period of growth, then further decline. More recently his career has been improving but his job satisfaction has plateaued. As his career continues to grow, his job satisfaction declines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Rapid personal development for the first few years, followed by a decline then a short period of growth and next a plateau that has continued for more than 20 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Chart shows highs and lows. The lows occurred at the beginning, in the middle, and towards the end of his career.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>This chart shows that a plateau occurred 10 years into his career and then again about 12 years later. This latter plateau is shown as a continuing decline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>This chart shows a plateau about 12 years into her career, which she said occurred because she stopped growing. Then followed 7 years away from work rearing children, followed by 13 years of personal development at a much lower level than that experienced earlier in her career. The chart shows a plateau that has continued for the last 17 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>No drawing supplied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>No drawing supplied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>This chart shows fluctuations that occurred at various stages throughout his career. Four plateaus are shown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>This chart shows two periods of decline in his career. The first one at about 18 years into his career – this lasted 9 years. The second plateau and decline began in year 28 of his career and has continued for the past 12 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>This chart shows a fluctuating career peppered with periods of growth and decline. The first decline occurred 3 years into his career; further declines occurred 3 years later; another, 9 years after that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>This chart shows steady progress in terms of personal development, with three periods of lesser development. These occurred at the early stages of his career, in the middle and at the end of a career that has spanned 40 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>This chart shows plateaus that occurred from around year 8 in his career. This lasted about 7 years and then a further plateau occurred a few years after that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>This is a listing of positive career moves from 1966 to 2000. The two entries after that describe a decline as a new management team was brought in and as he ‘began planning for retirement, balancing his life, family and work, enjoying less stress and not taking things too seriously’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>This is a straight line in a positive, upward direction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>This chart shows positive personal development for the first 20 years of his career. That is followed by 10 years of plateauing in a downward direction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>This chart shows a combination of personal growth and periods of plateauing. These plateaus occur approximately every 4 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>This chart spans 30 years with an early plateau 6 years into her career, a plateau at about year 20, and another occurring and continuing from year 30.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>This chart shows a severe dip at about year 8 of the person’s career. This is followed by several periods of personal growth and plateauing. The chart shows a projected career in decline commencing at year 30.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>This chart shows two periods of steady personal growth, separated in the middle by a period of 15 years of very significant growth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>This chart depicts a career that has spanned 23 years. The chart shows that from year 7, her career was less satisfying than her personal development, with the two strands of her life separating after that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Similar to case 30 above. The chart shows that skill development outgrew her job requirements from about age 23. She is now 52.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>This chart looks like a mind map. It shows high points in her life and a career plateau that has lasted the past 7 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>This chart shows a global career depicted as a series of steps, all but 3 of these steps are preceding upwards. The 3 steps in the downward direction relate to an illness early in his career, the latter 2 to career changes that involving stepping down from being the managing director to a lower job title.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>No chart supplied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>A series of steps describing a 30-year career that has plateaued at its early stages for about 9 years, and has now plateaued again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>This chart describes a career that has spanned 32 years, 20 of which are shown as a plateau.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>This chart depicts a 30-year career. The first 20 years show strong growth in personal development related to promotions. The more recent 7 years are shown as a plateau and after that 3 years of significant decline.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>This chart is of a 40-year career - shows growth related to job change every 4 to 5 years for the first 20 years of her career. Then there is a period of substantial growth for 5 years, followed by 15 years of plateauing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>This chart shows that progress through job changes can eventually lead to plateaus. It is a severe dip related to retrenchment and then there is continuous growth after a new job was found.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>This chart shows that a career of 25 years with two low points – one at year 5 the other year 23. Both of these low points were followed by job changes and positive outcomes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 3

STRUCTURAL / ORGANISATIONAL, CONTENT AND PERSONAL PLATEAUS: IN THEIR OWN WORDS
## Appendix 3

### Structural / Organisational, Content and Personal Plateaus: In their Own Words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case No.</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Job classification</th>
<th>Structural plateau</th>
<th>Content plateau</th>
<th>Personal plateau</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>Didn't get a promotion at age 40-42 and assumed that I had plateaued.</td>
<td>Would like a fundamental role change; last 18 months started to think about fulfilment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-F</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>I've been told in an indirect way that I'm too old.</td>
<td>I want something new to do.</td>
<td>Knowledge doesn't count for anything.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>Succession planning has been a negative – although I am in the succession planning scheme it is for the level of job that I've held for many years Subtle pressures on me to go.</td>
<td>I have achieved all of my professional ambitions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-F</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td></td>
<td>I want a new job that is away from number crunching; my job has changed every couple of years in the past but I’ve been in my current job for six years.</td>
<td>I want to be needed by my daughter and five grandchildren.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>Australia Post will need to do something for me in the next three years, I’ve been in this same job too long – it will be nine years then. Post discriminates against men in promotions, also there are jobs for mates which are based on</td>
<td>It is difficult to make a difference in a big bureaucracy. I am converging at work but diverging as a person and this is very frustrating. Aged workers can play a dead hand.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Comment</td>
<td>Comment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>----------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>I would like to work three days per week. If you are not backed by someone, you will go nowhere. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time – a younger person was preferred. Succession planning is too much trouble.</td>
<td>Older people are not considered for training. I'm disappointed that I could not make the contribution I'm capable of. Realistically, I'm content and resigned to staying where I am.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>I have a reputation for being surly and unco-operative. I don't trust the organisation.</td>
<td>I reached my peak at age 41 and I have to stay maybe another 19 years. At the moment my eyes are focused on retirement.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>My manager thinks that I need more people and customer service skills – I don’t agree. I’m only valued in my immediate work area. I’m disappointed at</td>
<td>I could quite effectively do the same work as a part-timer – my workload is only two to three days a week and so I think about sailing, golf and tennis. I’m right into sailing. I think that opportunities will go to someone younger – it's the real world.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>I started thinking about retirement at age 20 – it gets to the stage where you've just had enough. The driving to work, the time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td></td>
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<td>-------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>Being overlooked for promotions and there are lots of personality-based appointments.</td>
<td>Taken to make things happen at work, the frustrations from duplicated roles – all this builds up over time. I wonder whether it is just change for the sake of it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-F</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Rarely do you get asked to do things as you get older. I have a lot of experience and I am keen to pass it on, but I have no direct reports.</td>
<td>I need more challenges to stay. I don't see the organisation is big on information sharing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>Age and gender hold you back. I'm plateauing at work because of the speed of change; there is so much to catch up with. When younger people interview older workers almost a screen comes up – they lose the ability to listen to what you have.</td>
<td>I've recently separated from my husband and this has flattened me at the moment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-F</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>I have no qualifications. There is nowhere to go from Administrative Officer Grade 5.</td>
<td>Some people over 60 seem to lose energy and there is a need for new ideas; the loss of enthusiasm as older workers go on autopilot is a problem.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Citation</td>
<td>Comments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>the reason that I don't get satisfaction.</td>
<td>I think there is pressure to leave at age 55. If you are over 60, you are ridiculed. The lack of computer skills is an obvious lack in my curriculum vitae. I’ve had a lack of work stimulation over the last four years. During the last six months I’ve found it hard to get out of bed. Management do not care enough about the people who work for them.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>Currently I’m unattached and this is very stressful because of the unknown. Reorganisations tend to encourage people to leave in the 45+ zone. Once you've been here for three years you are painted with the internal brush. Ten years in the one job is too long.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>I was in succession planning but failed phase 2 and so I’m no longer in succession planning. Promotion by one level is not worth the effort.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>A new broom sweeps out the old. I think I might be too expensive for the organisation. [He said that his pay rate was about $200,000 per annum and he thought that the organisation could get someone to do the same job for $50,000 per annum.] If I was to leave the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
organisation, it would probably say, ‘Well, there’s another dinosaur off the books who is capable of supporting or sabotaging’.

<p>| 25 | 51 | Executive | The performance management assessment is not a particularly useful exercise. The problem is my manager considers me not innovative, too cautious, that I take too long – I’m not happy with some of these claims that are held against me. | I think I’ve been plateaued for about 12 years – there is a disincentive to come to work some days, my job is narrow and sterile. |
| 27-F | 51 | Middle management | You don't have an opportunity to share much as you get older; you are valued less in the organisation and there are less opportunities for career development. I think I've been plateaued for the last 5 to 10 years. |
| 39 | 46 | Middle management | I've plateaued because I’m in the middle of a restructure. Australia Post does not appreciate that older workers have a fair bit to offer – put on the scrap heap after 50. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Experience and Challenges</th>
<th>Personal Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>I feel blocked in purchasing, have been there for 15 years. I was constantly learning until the last seven years.</td>
<td>Note: This person has a serious illness and a daughter who receives a disability pension.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>I haven’t been promoted for 10 years but I received additional responsibility last year. I’ve plateaued, essentially more of the same. I’ve been thinking about skill development – I think I’ve plateaued out.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>Organisation restructures have influenced my capacity to influence.</td>
<td>It’s repetitious here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>I think that renewal comes at great expense. Generational antipathy can be quite unconscious. I think the nature of work has changed so much that people cannot sustain the pressure.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-F</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>It’s quite a novelty being asked your opinion when you are old.</td>
<td>I don’t apply for jobs – my husband puts pressure on me to work fewer hours.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32-F</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td>Office politics really annoys me. I’m not good at dealing with it, the myriad of personalities. I was managing a project and was shifted off it. I give candid responses that are not appreciated. I’ve treaded water for the last two to three years and will probably leave. I can do this job standing on my head.</td>
<td>I don’t get enough recognition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Position</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Executive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Executive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**My boss is not a relationship builder, they don’t work as a team. It’s every man for himself. There is a perception that I have nothing to contribute.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>I’ve a long history of undertaking managing director’s jobs that are global – but now I’m in a job that is not managing director.</td>
<td>It is important to be in control of what you are doing. I never stay long enough to become an expert.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>I’ve undertaken very demanding tasks in the past and these projects led to problems which then led to negative perceptions which were broadcast by the person who replaced me. I was a Group Manager and now no longer am one – this has humiliated me. I was involved in a number of complex political and ethical dilemmas and I came off second best.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>I’m uncertain about what is required in my job and I don’t know how to address this. I’m not in the succession planning system and would like to be in Tier 3. My manager doesn’t know me very well, the organisation is big</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and it can be unfeeling and fickle.

| 37 | 50 | Middle management | I’ve stayed in audit too long. They regard older workers like me as being in the ‘departure lounge’. I think succession planning stinks – older people are not part of the future. Most people over 50 are discouraged and this starts at about age 40. My ageing and transition is starting to come up in my performance reviews. | I think I’ve run my race at Australia Post – the job has narrowed, it has become operational, there is less responsibility for scheduling of work. The boss sees me as a font of knowledge about the history. I don’t want to be relied upon for my past knowledge because we’re moving forward. My job is narrowing it is starting to become specialised by discipline rather than having the breadth that it once had. |

| 38-F | 59 | Middle management | There were gender issues early in my career – I had married and had to leave my job; because of that I had no access to the superannuation scheme. At age 50 I was told that there were younger people who were better to spend money on. I have been identified with flavours-of-the- | I am not getting challenging and exciting work. Sometimes as you get older, you get a bit reluctant. I should have left as I’m starting to fold in on myself, which is narrowing possibilities. |
month / soft projects and this has held me back. These flavour of the month projects dealt with the culture of the organisation and were significant.
APPENDIX 4

LEARNING HABITS OF NON-PLATEAUED WORKERS
## Learning Habits of Non-plateaued Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case No.</th>
<th>Learning habits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Internal courses, Toastmasters, convener of Software Quality Association, formal training – 120 hours over three years, adult learning is preferred method – experiential, kept skills current by moving around in jobs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Briefings by computer companies, reading, no heavy desire for formal learning, Tier 3 succession planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Tier 3 succession planning, ‘learns by trying things’, reading, ‘the more you drill down in your knowledge the shallower you are in other areas’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Had a very senior job managing 2,000 people, which provided opportunities to apply his studies to his work. Started reading again, sharing information and journal articles and books with other thought leaders, trains harder and more to get him there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 F</td>
<td>Steady career development, a continuous learning – this has been very important, learning by doing, reading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 F</td>
<td>Learned through dealing with people and asking questions, loves brainstorming/getting people enthusiastic and thinking beyond the obvious. Grows through each challenge and learns from the environment; Tier 3 succession planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Lots of short courses, ‘personal development rocketed whilst trying to keep up with the technical environment’, project management, ‘lots and lots of reading’, likes whiteboards, things that are logical, short courses at universities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Not easy to separate what you learn at work and what you learn away from work, 90 hours of professional development every three years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 5

IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF A JOB:
NON-PLATEAUED WORKERS
## Important Aspects of a Job: Non-plateaued Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case No</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunity to interact with others, to improve things, to utilise knowledge acquired over the years; likes passing on his knowledge to others, new projects from time to time, challenge, being appreciated, valued for ideas and seeing them put into practice, opportunities to use entrepreneurial skills and to be altruistic, interacting with others and team members – works on relationships to get things done.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
<td>Job is now about relationship management rather than people/subordinate relationship. [Army background], structure of work associated with career change would be of interest; likes different issues all the time, variety and challenge, mental challenge; likes to be stimulated at work, part of the team, good conditions and good pay, opportunity to produce what needs to be produced, likes recognition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td>Not too much stress, from age 60 plans to phase out – maybe some consulting and technical writing, doesn't want to manage large numbers of staff. AMP [previous employer] became very hard-nosed – paternalistic, unpleasant and aggressive, trash and burn – would leave Australia Post if it became like that, keen for opportunity to add value and do quality work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
<td>Learning all the way through his career, wide variety of jobs from bottom-up; had problems to solve and had to make decisions when there were no rules, made him think about his capacity, undertook counselling and training – traineeship made him very confident, likes teams and teamwork, opportunity to apply his studies to his work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Enjoys helping out, doesn’t see herself stopping work but may yet step back to a few days a week; enjoys interaction with others, would like to change job – working with graphics desktop graphics; continuous learning very important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Manageable organisational politics – has left a job in the past when it became too competitive and observed that two-thirds of the department left as well; recognition, loves the big picture projects, talking to people, human resources; really loves learning things, wants to add value, will leave when not able to add value; ability to influence very important, respect very important; needs to contribute; needs to be able to do the whole job - wants to know the ‘ins and outs’ of everything, likes to see things happening, fully challenged with interesting work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>53</td>
<td></td>
<td>Broad job scope, responsibility and accountability, uninhibited access to people and information, realistic targets which lead to much better performance teamwork - cross-skills people and provides a lot more flexibility compared with working by yourself, learning more, three to four days work when phasing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to retirement, jobs where you can display flair are very important.

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Opportunity to learn very important in a job; politics can be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>wearing; teamwork and interaction with others; clarity of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>outcomes – knowing the goal, challenge; thinks he is moving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>away from the technical towards people as he ages; people-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>focused boss who is clear and direct; wary of a career move</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>that would involve long hours.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 6

IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF A JOB – PLATEAUED WORKERS
**Important Aspects of a Job: Plateaued Workers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case No.</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
<td>Challenge and satisfaction at work would encourage him to stay; needs to feel he contributes and that it is recognised; needs to be passionate about work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Currently there is no career development, no growth opportunities, no part-time work - but part-time work would not be very satisfying because people don’t look at part-time staff seriously.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to handle stress gets harder as you get older, want to be able to do the job your way; lack of bureaucratic process; ability to contribute; two to three days work per week leading to retirement; a bit of thinking – complexity, ability to really think things through; a boss he respects, friendship with boss; work as a team; learning, interested in context rather than technical aspects of a job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Job has enabled her to bring all of her experience to it – a full job comprising technical, field exposure and relationships; job that changes every couple of years; meeting people, staying in tune; part-time work, maybe scaling down and taking a few steps back; continuous learning very important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>41</td>
<td></td>
<td>The ability to make a difference – if feels stifled will probably move; challenge, inspirational work, learning; putting into practice is what keeps him at work; likes a new role every two years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to make a contribution, recognition, empowerment, good relations with managers, equitable treatment; rewarded for good performance- relationship with manager important – does not know what his manager’s values are; letting him get on with the job; learning of minor technical functions related to the job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>41</td>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunities for learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
<td>Recognition; three days per week; opportunity to use skills and knowledge of the market place; flexible environment, room to move, learning, networking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>41</td>
<td></td>
<td>Part-time work; finds it very difficult to work in a ‘public service mentality’ – people are protected by the system and most are over 50.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Likes to ‘pick and choose’ her work; feeling that she has something to offer, feeling that she has earned her salary; enjoys managing people; needs challenges and changes, loves learning and knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Learning pretty important, but wants to work less – say four days per week and would job share; opportunity to share information, opportunity to identify with the organisation – likes to be asked, likes a career change every few years – gets bored on holiday has to be doing something.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Complexity, would like to go to part-time or lower level of job; new challenges, new learning, feels has stayed at Australia Post too long.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Lack of boredom, satisfaction; people person, working with younger people; learning – currently a lack of learning in her job, which she believes is the reason that she doesn't get satisfaction.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Discipline and accountability; stimulation, management who care about the people; learning new things; likes to do favours and ask for favours.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>See the whole process; likes people contact; part-time role in transition to retirement; appreciated by peers for his expertise.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Growing is very important; maintaining rate of pay important; career progression; ability to influence things; learning very important.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Growing and developing in a different way, networking, challenge, ‘being in the inner sanctum’, opportunities for arguing and debating.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Challenge and mental stimulation, changing role, greater responsibility, greater appreciation of abilities; opportunities for new knowledge, but ‘job narrows and is sterile’, learning very important in the job; someone to champion your cause – backing you and not wanting to take all the running; more frequent job rotations.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Ability to influence policy, contribute, impact; it's about people being respected by high-level people; intellectual stimulation, lots of scope in job; likes to be asked for her views.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Likes to do a couple of special projects; hasn’t learned anything new; boss he respects; would stay, rather than retire, for a real challenge; phasing to retirement – two days per week, interesting and challenging work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Lack of boredom, lack of stress, lack of long hours, ability to balance family and work; never stayed anywhere more than four years in the past; ‘so much fun’, - combines all the skill she has learnt.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Work four days per week; started job-sharing but that failed because people couldn't make decisions in her absence; ‘bad’ management would force her to leave; shorter and fewer days but that is very irritating for other team members; to be heard, likes people to ask her things; has seen things implemented far too quickly without proper research.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Importance of Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Enjoys being part of things, contact with people, variety; has a creative side; likes participative management style, learning, autonomous, teamwork – adds enthusiasm and energy, ‘staying at work is nothing to do with her age – it has to do with the job’, no clear goals where she is and poor communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fresh challenges every couple of years, personal growth; didn't want to be trained in any specialist area; learning opportunities, always learning new things; being in control of what you are doing, grows from doing lots of things.</td>
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<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
<td>Job ‘variety to stay interested’, learning very important; volunteers to be the first one to take on a particular project; lots of good challenges; likes feedback from the boss.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Doesn’t have kids so work is very important; three days work per week phasing to retirement at around age 60; opportunities to learn, intellectual challenge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>51</td>
<td></td>
<td>A job that is important and responsible; responsibility for scheduling of work and training etc; broad range of responsibilities, challenging; feeling of being valued for operational knowledge and networks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Autonomy, utilisation of skills, learning very important – likes to keep upgrading and updating, challenging and exciting work; likes to be busy, job variety; lack of frustration at work; four days work per week leading to retirement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sorting out difficult projects; stability and work in one place – likes to change in the one organisation; autonomy, accountability; doesn't like feeling trapped – Australia Post is so varied; learning things, project work, variety and multi-dimensional tasks; will continue working as long as he enjoys it; ability to achieve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Working with people right across the organisation, seeing the broad picture, teamwork; likes change, learning new things, looks forward to change, likes a job change every five years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
<td>Part-time work; difficult to job-share because of the technical nature of the job; job variety.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX 7

OLDER WORKERS’ PERCEPTION OF THEIR VALUE TO EMPLOYERS
### Older Workers’ Perceptions of their Value to Employers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case No.</th>
<th>Case study participant view of their strengths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Wisdom and understanding, loyalty and affiliation with employer, knowledge acquired over the years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Experience – in a lot of cases has been there before and done it. Manages risks better than younger people. Thinks younger people are somewhat confident these days – but thinks this confidence may be a veneer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>‘Fifty years experience will walk out, examples of how things work in previous roles – reinforcement, passion and guts, tenacity, enthusiasm, organisation values, pusher, shaper, pushing forward, tried to do things the best possible way’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>‘Willing pair of hands, loyalty’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>‘Likes to think that experience counts and that there is a place for new skills currency.” There is a need to match the new by including people who have seen the problem before, the networks, the experience. Could mentor the new people – she is interested in seeing that Post “does the right thing in a few years down the track’’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>‘Sense of humour, common sense, understanding of office routines’ – tends to mentor staff and contractors, experience, and reputation for can-do, resourceful, high self-expectations, a fair bit of affinity with Australia Post – ‘something for the common good’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>‘You change so much over a working life – green when you start – experience’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Produces good-quality work, knowledge, appreciation of the history over an extended period, high-level writing skills, management of risk, skills, opinions, contribution – ‘if they stop believing (in him) it would be a sad day’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>‘A lot of people can’t do her job, conscientious’, ‘brings a degree of calm to the workplace, a lot of young people are quite abrupt; focused and being very judgmental. Good at relationships -- young people might pick up the technical a bit faster but not relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Does what she is asked to do efficiently, calming influence, socially cohesive, life skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Experience, respect for the culture, capacity to moderate what she believes is behaviour and ideas that are too radical, an understanding of the history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Experience, does a good job, understands award conditions, training, job-related skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Knowledge in his head – not on file and young people don't have it; life skills – came through experience; understanding of people – aligning of effort, prioritising, influencing and winning people over; has seen property crashes and can sense them coming; not afraid of sharing information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Is a bower bird with papers; answers 25 questions per day about corporate history; some policy developers have never been in a post office (people devalue contributions and abilities; would rather talk to people than use email; social cohesion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Patient, steady, familiarity with the whole environment and what happened -- need balance in a team, his experience is valued by his peers.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Judgment in decision-making, can balance many things, innovative streak, can package ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Knowledge, understanding of people, the importance of the issues based on past experience, loyal, hard-working employee with ideas, networks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Interpretive skills, ‘can ride a PC,’ growth in self-confidence, in reflection has got better over time, intuition, translate other people’s expertise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Understanding of the culture, wide network of contacts, organisation and scheduling skills, mediation and conflict resolution skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ability to take a mature, long-term view; can really think things through; has experience in Philatelic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Knowledge that he has invested in; how the organisation works.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Experience and understanding and has done a lots of things not available to younger people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>‘You get wiser as you build experience’; how to translate education and qualifications into the business environment; gut feel, intuition that doesn't come from study; experience helps cut through the crap; knowledge and experience of the market place and someone who is confident in their abilities in this area; can see the training and techniques in a real-world environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>More tolerant of other people’s weaknesses as he gets older.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Organisation skills, loyalty, commitment, experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Intuition, ‘can see the warning bells’; technical skills – balance for younger people, knows the shortcuts, the networks, can get around roadblocks, in his work there are no surprises, proper policies, some contribution to the bottom line.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Flexible, reliable, valued as a person, management know that the job will be done.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Loyal, dependable, attendance, tries to promote the organisation when he leaves Australia Post it will lose nothing, as others have the same things to offer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Ability to read long and complex documents -- dealing with supplier disputes over intellectual property, you can learn by your mistakes and you need to go through this to learn when to push and when not to -- experience in commercial matters, projects and proposals. Expresses himself well in writing, has done a lot of contract drafting, over the years worked in three countries, prudent, maintains confidentiality, doesn't break the law, reliable, hard-working (50 to 60 hours per week). Seems to be good at reflection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>&quot;A fifth sense -- bringing experience to bear and make a reasonable assessment&quot; &quot;and ability to see at an earlier stage than others that the output may not be right and has the ability to see connections of issues at the micro level and at the broader macro level&quot;. Managing subjectivity -- devoted and caring. Ability to get across the detail which feeds into a fairly accurate assessment of the overall picture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>“Someone who cares for down-and-out managers -- the secret networks that few understand’, lots of knowledge and experience, ability to fix a problem that others would have to go through the maze to solve, knowledge of transport that is valued by head-hunters. When he leaves –“another dinosaur off the books”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Very good understanding of the organisation but not necessarily in current job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Experience in terms of understanding the culture which is absolutely vital, academic background, concentration, perseverance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Experience; capacity to know who to call and start things rolling; the build-up of internal and external networks – external networks are the most important.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In her job it is critical that things don't go wrong, political nous; grammar, writing skills; skills that come from maturity – most problems are a repeat. Making implicit knowledge explicit; working in teams; working out which battles to fight and which to let go; conceptual and writing skills – capacity to articulate things; doesn't have difficulty dealing with the hierarchy. Experience, loyalty, doesn't cause problems; expertise, does her job, reliable ‘could get someone younger who doesn't know anything’; gets to the core of the problem, knowledge of the traps and history, ‘people refer to you all the time to verify’.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Positive and adds enthusiasm and energy, candid responses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Resilient, determined, analytical; experience, can write Board papers, likes to get things right; thinks like a scientist but sees a place for emotive judgments; intuitive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Experience; helping shape the direction; technical knowledge; understanding of history and the mistakes; valuing his knowledge and experience; drive and direction; skills in production management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Street-smart in operations, analytical approach good with the intangible things you can't get from a textbook, can see the political side of business – scapegoating – has the political smarts, maturity – you see the whole gamut.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Knowledge of the history, the traps people do ask things of her and she wants this, probably do things more efficiently because of knowledge, gets to the core of the problem, knowledge at hand to deal with people over copyright issues, loyal, not ambitious, does her job, reliable, and doesn't cause and problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Her experience skills and personality, patience and tolerance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>