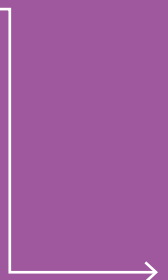


**The next
20 years**



Mid life career review

extending working life through
career review at mid-life



Mid-Life Career Review

First findings: Extending working lives

→ **Learning through Life¹ identified that key moments of transition throughout life should drive opportunities for learning to meet changing needs. One such transition takes place around the age of 50.**

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills asked NIACE to develop and implement a pilot project to look at the way a rounded career² review could support people to make changes during mid-life in whatever direction they needed their lives to go.

NIACE believes that:

- Adults can **extend their working lives** in ways which suit them and the complexity of their lives if they can access the right advice at the right time.
- **Learning opportunities** for all age groups are vital to support adults through transitions.
- To make **successful transitions**, so that they can live the lives they want to lead, people may need support from specialist advisers and peers in both the workplace and the community.

The pilot shows that we can help people change their behaviours and plans if given the **support** to do so. This could lead to better **choices**, longer working lives, better health and a wealthier retirement.

→ **Context**

As Britain's population ages, it is increasingly important to ensure that the economy makes good use of the skills and aspirations of people in their 40s, 50s and 60s. Government is keen to encourage people to stay longer in work – and to remain productive while there – and older people in general welcome this, provided work is well managed and flexible. However, (illegal) age discrimination, inflexible working practices and a lack of training mean that many people leave work earlier than they would like and the economy can sustain.

Furthermore, people over 50 are much more likely to be in jobs which do not make full use of their skills and, once out of work, they are much more likely to experience long-term unemployment. If individuals had access to a rounded approach to career education throughout life, this would equip them to manage their own careers/lives more effectively and seek short interventions when they felt they needed external input, such as at mid-life. A service which gives individuals the chance to talk with an impartial expert about their options, as well as about the opportunities and risks of training, job and career change and changes to the make-up of their working life, could help individuals to overcome many of the difficulties they may face in mid-life.

The Mid-Life Career Review project aimed to test the demand for such a service. It explored how career reviews at mid-life could contribute to the government's extending working life agenda, encourage people to stay longer and more productively in work or consider different types of working patterns and ensure that people retire in circumstances which make them healthy and independent in retirement.

→ **Managing an extended working life is vital for the success of individuals and their employers.**

An extended working life might include paid and unpaid work and flexible working, to take account of other demands on individuals and their personal aspirations.

Providers of careers education and adult learning have a role to play in extending working life, as do employers.

If people are helped to stay longer in paid work there are economic gains not only for them, but also for employers and the state.

The Mid-Life Career Review project involved 17 pilot partners who delivered reviews to over 3000 clients aged from 45 to 65. Partners included National Careers Service providers, learning providers and voluntary organisations, as well as workplace learning advocates, union learning reps and community learning champions.

→ **Key findings for policy and practice**

There is a demand for mid-life career reviews but people need to be well informed of the benefits if they are to take up the offer.

The offer should not be 'one size fits all', but tailored to meet individual needs.

The approach can be embedded into provision by career guidance and learning providers, as well as by employers.

Mid-life career reviews can be supported by peer and voluntary efforts – 'expert signposters' in the community and workplace.

Partnership working is key to the delivery of the mid-life career review approach.

→ **Reviewing 'career'**

Clients valued being able to talk to someone, reflect on their situation, review their options, and plan ahead. Access to support helped boost their confidence, self-esteem and motivation. Fifteen of the 17 pilots reported increased client confidence and motivation.

A whole-life approach is needed: a review should cover far more than paid employment. Rather, it should encompass health, care and caring, finance, flexible use of time, retirement and issues of concern identified by each individual.

A diverse blend of approaches has proved effective in supporting mid-life clients.

Advisers found that many clients experienced a lack of self-confidence about gaining and maintaining employment. This was closely linked to perceptions or actual experience of age discrimination by employers.

The range of topics discussed in the pilot sessions prompted many providers to realise that career guidance for this age group needs to be holistic and cover anything that may affect a client's ability to work or retire.

Successful client recruitment was dependent on strong partnerships, client interest and the buy-in and skills of advisers, in addition to support from union learning reps, advocates and champions.

Where they were offered, longer client sessions allowed advisers to gain more in-depth knowledge of the issues affecting mid-life clients and to develop their skills in asking questions about sensitive subjects, e.g. finances and health. Three-quarters of advisers surveyed reported improved knowledge and skills in working with mid-life clients. Importantly, these advisers reported an improved service for mid-life clients as a result.

Pilots reported partnering with local employers and highlighting to them the wider benefits of undertaking a mid-life career review, which included gaining a more detailed understanding of the needs, interests and aspirations of their employees.

¹ Schuller, T. and Watson, D. (2009) *Learning through Life: Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning*. Leicester: NIACE.

² We use the term 'career' in its broadest sense – it is not just about paid work, but about taking an educational approach to the whole of life's opportunities and challenges and learning how to manage them to meet your own needs.

Findings

→ Models of mid-life career reviews

Pilot providers tested a range of approaches and combinations of methods, including group work and face-to-face and telephone sessions. Peer support through group work was particularly beneficial for those clients who were feeling less confident as they could learn from each other's experiences.

→ Engaging clients

Successful client recruitment was dependent on strong partnerships, client interest and the buy-in and skills of advisers.

Most pilots initially found recruiting clients more challenging than expected. This was an ongoing activity which required flexibility and a variety of approaches. The value of personal contact with potential clients was particularly highlighted.

“I certainly feel that I’m moving forward... I do have some idea of the sorts of things I need to do. At first I didn’t have a picture or a plan but now I’ve got a clearer picture of the sorts of things I should be doing.”

→ Career guidance needs

Over half of clients discussed training or learning opportunities or career development, and a third discussed volunteering. Other topics which clients discussed in depth included self-employment, finances, health, retirement options and caring responsibilities.

The range of topics discussed in the sessions prompted many pilots to realise that career guidance for this age group should focus on the individual as a whole, and cover everything which may affect a client's ability to work, manage his/her life or retire.

→ Client impact

Clients valued being able to talk to someone in order to reflect on their situation, review their options and plan ahead. Fifteen of the 17 pilots reported increased client confidence and motivation to search for employment as a result of the support received through the project.

Clients taking part in group sessions benefited from interaction with people of a similar age and facing comparable issues/challenges. Group sessions enabled clients to demonstrate and enhance their employability skills; for example, team working, communication and respecting different viewpoints.

Across the project, clients accessed further support (such as other advice on health or finance), progressed into learning or volunteering and gained paid work.

→ Adviser reflections

Most advisers welcomed the opportunity to spend more time with each client, although some needed initial support to work in unfamiliar ways. Some providers found it helpful to give advisers their own mid-life review before they took part in the project.

Advisers experienced a range of benefits from taking part in the project and their feedback was overwhelmingly positive. For many advisers, at least one aspect of the project was a new experience for them.

Advisers either developed new skills or were able to use their existing skills more extensively due to the additional time they were able to spend with each client.

Some advisers indicated that they had improved their own knowledge and skills to work with mid-life clients. The additional time in sessions allowed advisers to gain more in-depth knowledge of the issues affecting mid-life clients and develop their skills in asking questions about sensitive subjects, such as finances and health.

Peer support amongst advisers was very important in order for them to share their experience and develop the confidence to deliver mid-life career reviews.

“I think it’s brilliant what [adviser] is doing. She’s keeping me going at work.”

→ Pilot providers

Pilot partners were extremely positive about their involvement in the project and experienced a range of benefits, including the development of staff skills, stronger partnerships and greater client satisfaction. Importantly, almost three-quarters of the surveyed advisers reported an improved service for mid-life clients.

Many pilots found that they strengthened and developed new partnerships with organisations such as Jobcentre Plus, colleges, employers and non-governmental organisations. This improved the referral routes in and out of the pilots and raised awareness of their work.

A key partner for many pilot sites has been one or more local employers. Benefits for employers included: gaining a more detailed understanding of the needs, interests and aspirations of their employees; reviewing and developing current working practices and policies; providing support to older workers; finding out about free support available for staff; and more confident, motivated and loyal employees who feel valued by the organisation.

Sustainability

→ The pilots intended to continue their mid-life career review activities, some by embedding it fully within their current offer to individuals and others by seeking further funding to offer an enhanced programme.

Providers can embed mid-life review activities within wider guidance and learning provision, share best practice with all advisers and continue to use the resources from the project.

Some pilots are looking to expand their mid-life offer to other delivery formats, partner organisations or client groups. These developments are contingent on gaining further funding to expand this provision.

What now?

→ Working for longer has a clear financial benefit for individuals, employers and the state, but extended working lives need planning, preparation and management by people and their employers if positive economic and wellbeing outcomes are to be realised. Individuals need support, advice and new knowledge and skills to make life transitions well. One starting point is to review life, learning and career at mid-life; the Mid-Life Career Review project has proved that this approach works and can be delivered in a variety of ways. We now need to embed this provision so that all who need it can gain access to it.

The Mid-Life Career Review project will continue to publish its findings over the summer and autumn of 2014 and will hold events and seminars. Follow-up research with clients will take place over this period to strengthen the findings.

Many project partners will continue to embed the approaches and models in their ongoing work, and these are likely to be taken up by other providers and employers. Existing and new providers will have access to resources and materials from the pilots. NIACE will offer training in the career review approaches, tailored to specific contexts.

The results of this project so far indicate the need for provision to support adults through all of life's transitions, founded on access to support and interventions from careers, learning and voluntary sector services when each person needs it. Ideally this would follow on from an established career education, but this is not currently available to most people. In the absence of a whole-life approach, adults need access to support, but public awareness of the role and importance of careers guidance appears to be very thin and, without active promotion, many of those who could most benefit will fail to do so.



Contact

→ For further information on the Mid-Life Career Review, visit:
www.niace.org.uk/current-work/mid-life-career-review

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) is an independent charity which promotes adult learning across England and Wales. Through its research, development, publications, events, outreach and advocacy activity, NIACE works to improve the quality and breadth of opportunities available for all adults so they can benefit from learning throughout their lives.

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