Search for Meaning in the Professional Projects of Seniors at the End of Their Careers: an Interpretative Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

This article explores the search for meaning in life and work, particularly among senior citizens at the end of their careers. It examines the impact of advancing age and career cycle on seniors' needs and priorities, highlighting how this prompts them to seek new goals. The study focuses on individuals aged 50 and over, analyzing how their life experience influences the construction of meaning in their work and personal lives.

The research uses a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Participants shared their stories, revealing periods of intense questioning and reflection on their past and present. Several themes emerged from the analysis, including personal and professional mid-life changes, job dissatisfaction and loss of meaning, and the realization of new professional projects.

The study revealed that the realization of new professional projects contributes significantly to the meaning of work and life for seniors, and that these projects are often motivated by a quest for meaning. It also underlines the importance for seniors of pursuing goals and designing projects in line with this phase of their career, contributing to their well-being and resilience in the face of changes in the professional world and ageism.

The results of the study suggest that older workers are capable of engaging in demanding projects, and challenge stereotypes about age and learning. The study highlights the importance for employers and society of creating a supportive environment that enables senior workers to find continued meaning in their work.

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In recent decades, the search for meaning in life and work has become a growing concern in modern society. This search for meaning is arousing considerable scientific interest, particularly in the fields of sociology and psychology, where researchers are striving to understand and analyze this need in scientific terms.

According to the Centre Inffo / CSA 2021 vocational training barometer, which surveyed 1,600 French workers, 22% of those considering changing jobs do so to "give more meaning to their lives". This statistic highlights a potential link between career choice and the quest for meaning in life.

Individuals seeking a career change or re-entry into the world of work, especially after the age of fifty, illustrate this trend. Faced with existential questions about their professional future and the perception of their own finitude, these people often seek to redefine their professional trajectory. As Heslon points out in his book "Psychology of the Ages of Life" (2022, p. 133), seniority leads us to question the relationship between the meaning of life and finitude, prompting us to reflect on whether we have truly "inhabited" our lives and whether we can continue to do so.

With increased maturity and self-awareness, these individuals aspire to greater autonomy and a professional life in line with their aspirations, self-image and personality, in harmony with the different spheres of their lives.

These field observations raise important questions about the link between seniors' questions and career choices, and their search for meaning in life and at work. To what extent does the need for meaning influence seniors' professional decisions? What are the key elements structuring the meaning of life and work at this age and career stage?

Seniority in the French business world

The definition of seniority in the professional world in France remains unclear, although fifty often marks a turning point in a career. INSEE data target the 55-64 age group as the main age group for working seniors (Manné & Rousseau, 2020). Despite an increase in their participation since the 2000s, French seniors remain less active compared to other age groups (Prouet & Rousselon, 2018). This situation raises questions about the challenges facing seniors, resulting from a variety of factors, including age-related biological and psychological changes, as well as intensifying work demands. In addition, higher wage costs due to seniority can put them at a disadvantage to younger employees.

This study focuses on people aged 50 and over. With an activity rate of less than 60% among 55-64 year-olds (DARES, 2021), we adopt the term "last part of career" to include both workers before retirement age and those pursuing post-retirement professional activity. Although discrepancies exist between administrative, biological and psychological age (Heslon, 2021), individuals over 50 have passed the midpoint of human life. The prospects of this last professional phase and the anticipation of retirement are a major subject of reflection, even concern, for many senior citizens.

People aged between 50 and 64 in 2023, born between 1959 and 1983, have lived through major economic crises, globalization and the rise of mass unemployment. As Préel (2000) points out, these generations have had to compete with the baby-boomers for jobs. These generations have also witnessed ageism and age-related stereotyping, watching their elders being pushed out the door from the age of 55 (Hansen & Siard, 2006, p. 66).

With the postponement of the retirement age, senior citizens now have to remain active up to, and sometimes beyond, the legal retirement age. Reforms aimed at safeguarding the pension system are highlighting the employment of senior citizens as an issue of concern for public authorities. In France, various measures have been put in place since the 2000s to promote the employability of seniors, including the obligation for employers to organize "second career interviews" from the age of 45, thus encouraging people in their forties to think about the next steps in their career (www.travail-emploi.gouv.fr).

Looking back and questioning meaning

Mid-life, defined more by psychological age than administrative age, generally occurs around the forties and fifties. This period is often marked by intense retrospection, as individuals evaluate their past and look to the future. Heslon (2021) highlights this phase of life as a key moment for the existential question: "What am I going to do with the time I have left to live?". It's a time when profound questions arise about the meaning and direction of life.

With maturity, a better understanding of self emerges, including a clearer recognition of personal values, needs and aspirations. The individual compares his or her current life with the one he or she would have liked, evaluating successes and failures, unfinished projects and unsatisfied needs. At the same time, awareness of the passage of time and the inevitable decline in physical and cognitive capacities leads to reflection on what one would like to live with the time remaining. Heslon (2021, p. 100) describes this period as a time of reconciliation with the past, while looking to the future.

To optimize the time remaining before old age, a readjustment of personal and professional goals is often necessary, including a rebalancing between different spheres of life. Preparing for the latter part of working life is a crucial starting point, as work continues to represent a significant part of the lives of active seniors, and is also a major source of meaning.

Boutinet (2012) sees the different stages of life as periods in which projects can be developed, including the adult's vocational project: "the concept of project enables individuals at a certain stage of their existence to anticipate the next sequence (...) It thus serves to define the conditions of choice and orientation that arise at key stages of existence" (Boutinet, 2021, p.84). These vocational projects emanate from past life assessments and depend on the ability of senior workers to envisage the future. Often, choices of professional orientation and/or working conditions are integrated into these new life projects, making them more consistent with this stage of life and the need for meaning felt.

In-depth Exploration of the Meaning of Life and Work

In today's context, the terms "loss of meaning in work" and "search for meaning" are often evoked, but their interpretation varies significantly. In the field of psychology, meaning is a complex, multidimensional concept, encompassing dimensions such as significance, direction and sensation. Researchers seek to understand this concept either by examining objects charged with meaning, such as a meaningful life or work, or by identifying the sources that generate this meaning.

Existential psychology, rooted in philosophy with references to Heidegger, Kierkegaard and Sartre, examines the meaning of life in a broader context. Frankl, for example, with his logotherapy, emphasized that the search for meaning is a fundamental motivation of the human being. According to him, meaning is not innate, but is constructed through an active, personal search. This approach is reinforced by contemporary research, which sees meaning as a reflexive construction based on our experiences and their cognitive evaluation.

Meaning is deeply subjective and evolves with the interaction between the individual and his or her environment. For senior citizens, the reinterpretation of past experiences is essential for constructing the meaning of their lives and work. Martela and Steger (2016) distinguish the meaning of life from the meaning of existence, the former being a personal quest to find what makes life meaningful. Key components of meaning in life include significance, direction, understanding and coherence between expectations and reality.

Regarding the meaning of work, Steger et al (2012) see it as an extension of the meaning of life. Meaningful work therefore enriches the overall meaning of an individual's life. Arnoux-Nicolas (2019) points out that the meaning of work is defined by the individual's perception of his or her work and relationship to it, based on the lived experience of work and the interpretation of past experiences. Morin (2008) has identified characteristics of work that can provide meaning, including ethics, learning opportunities, autonomy, interpersonal relationships, usefulness and recognition.

Meaning is therefore a subjective, dynamic and evolving phenomenon, influenced by individual experience and the

different stages of life. This evolution of meaning, in both personal and professional life, is crucial to understanding the human experience as a whole.

Methodology

Our research draws on the unique career paths of workers aged 50 and over, viewing this age group as a crucial period in their working lives. These individuals undertake significant introspection, often initiated by a skills assessment, aimed at determining their future career trajectory. This reflective process involves looking back at their past career path and assessing their current situation, relating their experiences to their personal identities, aspirations and values. This introspective process can reveal the perception of meaning - or lack of it - in their current life and work. The aim is to put in place strategies to approach the next stage of their career in an aligned and satisfied way.

The study explores the impact of perceived and sought-after meaning in life and work on seniors' final career choices. We seek to understand how professional decisions, integrated into seniors' life projects, contribute to bringing meaning to their lives. Our research question is therefore:

What is the relationship between the development of seniors' career plans and the meaning they attribute to their lives and work?

Based on the previous literature review, we formulate the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1 (H1): As individuals progress through the life cycle, they modify their life goals, particularly in the professional sphere.
- Hypothesis 2 (H2): The choice of new goals is influenced by the search for meaning, in both personal and professional life.
- Hypothesis 3 (H3): The realization of new professional projects contributes to enriching the meaning of work and the meaning of life for seniors at the end of their careers.

Method

To study the complex concept of meaning, several methodologies can be employed, ranging from qualitative to quantitative techniques. In our research, we favour a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews. This method is particularly well-suited to capturing the personal construction of meaning by individuals, as well as variations in its components as a function of age.

We have chosen to apply Phenomenological Interpretative Analysis (Smith et al., 2022). This method, which has its roots in phenomenology and focuses on lived experience, enables us to delve into the singular world of each individual to understand their experience as Being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1986). IPA thus recognizes the uniqueness of each lived experience.

In this approach, the subject is considered throughout the research as a co-analyst of his or her experience, thus enabling a double analysis: an initial interpretation by the subject himself or herself, followed by a more in-depth analysis by the researcher (Santiago-Delefosse & Carral, 2016, pp. 36-45).

Data collection

The interviews took place face-to-face, in a room offering a setting conducive to open and confidential discussion. Data collection was carried out by means of semi-structured interviews, with two sessions per participant, each lasting approximately 1 to 1.5 hours. During the second interview, the participant can react to the initial interpretations of the data collected.

Each participant gave written informed consent to take part in this research.

Population

The study focuses on individuals aged 50 and over, whether still in work or not, who have undertaken or are currently engaged in thinking about the last part of their professional career.

Three fifty-somethings with a significant project for the latter part of their careers took part in this study (Table 1).

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Participants	Type	Age	Professional situation	Level and field of study
P1 Emile	Men	52	Computer scientist	Master 2, psychology
P2 Edwige	Woman	56	Guidance counsellor	Master 2, psychology
P3 Marie	Woman	53	Human resources manager	Master 2, psychology

Results

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews (Table 2). They are grouped together to form the following three clusters: mid-life: changes and awareness; job dissatisfaction and loss of meaning; and the realization of new projects as sources of meaning.

Table 2. Synthesis of all clustering

Clustering	Grouping of themes
1. Midlife: changes and awareness	- Changes in the personal sphere (couple, children) - Self and life awareness - Discovering unknown aspects of yourself - Maturity acquired through life experiences - Reconnecting with an abandoned vocational path
2. Job dissatisfaction and loss of meaning	- Reduced job satisfaction - Changes in work content and organization - Deteriorating workplace relations - Loss of meaning
3. New projects and their implementation as sources of meaning	- usefulness of work - meaning of the project

1. *Clustering "*Midlife: change and awareness *"*

This first cluster brings together different themes: the changes in the personal and psychic lives of mid-life adults, and the learning and awareness that contribute to the maturing process and greater self-knowledge.

1.1. Changes in the personal sphere" theme

Between their forties and fifties, all the participants experienced changes in their personal lives. Marie and Emile went through a separation. For all three mothers, their children have reached adulthood, and most have left home.

> *...emotional changes, well yes, there were a lot of things actually. There's been a separation' (Emile)*
>
> *My divorce was when I was 39. I had a bit of a mid-life crisis.(Tia)*
>
> *'They [the children] have left home. My daughter left in 2021, she graduated. [...] As for my son, yes, at one point it was a worry for me, so it was worries as well as work [...] Now he's doing his own thing. [Now he's doing his own thing' (Edwige).*

As the children take off, mothers generally have more time and energy to concentrate on their own needs and aspirations. The separation of couples, which can be emotionally difficult at first, subsequently offers more freedom and autonomy, as in the case of Marie and Emile. This makes it easier to pursue projects.

1.2. "Awareness and discovery of unknown aspects of oneself" theme

Marie and Emile have reported realizations at different points in their lives. Approaching forty, Marie looked back on the first part of her life and decided to end her marriage. More recently, the realization about her relationship with work came during the Covid-19 pandemic.

> '...there was a big, big change, that is, I realized what had been going on in my whole life. It was a bit like looking back on my life and realizing that I've always been unhappy.'
>
> People used to say I was my brother's sister, my mother's daughter, my father's daughter, my children's mother. I didn't have an existence of my own.'(...) 'Emotionally, I've always been hypersensitive [...] My children told me that my hypersensitivity was a strength, and that too was a trigger.'

On another note, a new awareness during the Covid-19 pandemic has changed Marie's relationship to work, and she wants to work less in the latter part of her career:

> '...it's since the confinement when I realized that I wasn't obliged to put so much work on my back, and that at some point, I'm also coming to the end of my career and it would be nice if I just enjoyed myself [...] My priority is living, really living [...] Work is less of a priority than it used to be.'

As for Emile, she says she has learned a lot about herself in the face of adversity, recounting how she successfully defended her son, a victim of school bullying.

> "...me, who didn't generally dare to assert myself, there (...) I pulled out my claws (...) For my son, I was able to overcome my shyness (...). That had quite an impact on me because I said to myself, but I'm able to do that for my son, so I must be able to do it in other situations. It taught me a lesson too."

Emile herself was a victim of harassment at work over two periods when, confronted with her own limitations, she was forced to mobilize her resources and seek outside help to cope. Aware of being different and out of step with others, Emile went much further in questioning herself:

> "I felt different, but I couldn't explain it (...) I came across a program on TV (...) where a young woman was talking about her high potential, and it really affected me (...) Then, 4 months later, I came across a similar program where two families were talking about their children. And now I'm so, so upset that all I do is cry at night.

Disturbed by unanswered questions, she consulted a psychologist. The results of the neuropsychological assessment indicated a profile of high intellectual potential (HPI). It was a shock:

> *I was speechless for a minute [...] I couldn't utter a single word. And then the tears came. But I really wasn't expecting it.*

Discovering himself as an HPI adult is a revealing and transformative process. Emile will gain a better understanding of how he functions, learn to accept his differences and develop his self-esteem by building on his strengths.

1.3. Maturity with age and enhanced self-confidence" theme

At this stage of life, all experiences, positive and negative, have contributed to adult learning. In addition, the reflective process mobilized by professional or skills assessments - all three have used this type of mechanism - encourages awareness and contributes to personal and professional maturation. Emile, a shy, introverted young woman, had come a long way from *her* previous career as a neuropsychologist.

> *"A better understanding of myself, and a greater desire to experiment... to go out and discover things without fear."*

As for Tia, awareness of her resources helped her to emerge stronger from her separation:

> *Before] I used to say I couldn't do anything because I was fragile (...) After 39 years, there was all this development, where cognitively, emotionally, affectively etc., I realized that yes, I had more abilities than I thought.*
> *'*

Edwige, the only one to remain in a couple and to have experienced the mid-life period with serenity, is confident and aware of her abilities, particularly as a support professional.

> *"...when you're at the end of your career and you reach the age I'm at now - in my fifties - I think there's a maturity that makes you look at what's most essential. Emotionally, I find it much easier to have someone burst into tears in front of me than when I was younger, I think. It's a distance I'm able to maintain.*

Apart from Edwige, who has always demonstrated self-determination in her choices, the other participants feel a greater need for autonomy towards the living environment.

> *In the first part of my career, I'd say I followed the river [...] I'm 53 and I tell myself I need to really allow myself to go where I want to go' (Tia).*
>
> *So at 43, when we split up, I became independent again [...] I think I need to be on my own [...] not necessarily to live alone but, in any case, to be master of my own home.' (Emile)*

Greater self-confidence in one's abilities seems to be accompanied by a greater need for self-determination, particularly in the case of Marie and Emile, who suffered from a lack of self-confidence when they were younger.

1.4. Theme: "Reconnecting with an abandoned vocational path".

In their exploration of new career paths, two out of three participants returned to a former career choice. Having made a voluntary reorientation after her Bac+4, it was around the age of 40 that Edwige felt the urge to return to psychology, previously put aside by economic choice.

> *I wanted to go back to studying psychology, which I had interrupted while doing my master's degree in Toulouse*

Marie did not continue her studies in psychology after graduating. Twenty-four years later, helped by the results of her skills assessment, she wanted to pursue this path, which she had put on hold.

> *I said to myself, 'I dream of being a psychologist, but I won't allow myself to do it because I don't feel I'm capable. When I did my skills assessment, it came back to me and I thought, maybe I should give it a try anyway.'*

The assessment programs offered to older workers enable them to reflect on their career path, facilitating the discovery or rediscovery of professional interests that can be transformed into a project.

2. *Clustering "*Job dissatisfaction and loss of meaning"

This theme explores the various reasons for dissatisfaction and loss of meaning in work, which give rise to the desire for change. Two participants (Marie and Emile) seem to have experienced many more reasons for dissatisfaction and a greater loss of meaning than the third (Edwige).

2.1. Decreased job satisfaction" theme

An individual's desire to evolve can mean that a position that was suitable at the outset provides less satisfaction over time. Edwige aspired, but didn't succeed for years, to reach a higher grade and, above all, to have an activity richer in interpersonal skills: '*At 40, I asked to move up to an engineer's grade and to become a psychologist* After 15 years as a computer scientist in the civil service, Emile describes her job as "humming" because it had become routine, with fewer opportunities for development.

2.2. Theme "Changes in work content and organization

Restructuring and changes in organizational strategy also have an impact on workers' feelings. Emile felt the weight of bureaucracy growing ever heavier. For Tia, the takeover of the company to which she had been attached for over 10 years and the arrival of new management with values she did not share marked the end of an era.

2.3. Degradation of relations at work" theme

For Marie, who felt like she was "part of the family" of her former boss, the change in the management team was very difficult.

> 'The big boss, with me it didn't go well. He actually tried to trick me. I think he wanted to get rid of me. He tried to turn the staff against me.'

Emile has also experienced the deterioration of relationships at work as a result of the actions of a stalker:'He broke me down with the other colleagues [...] and that made me so unhappy'.

2.4. Loss of meaning" theme

Losing sight of the social impact of our work leads to a loss of meaning, and conflicts of values with the organization where we work.

> That's why I joined the public service, to provide a service to the public. And little by little, I didn't feel that public service in my work anymore. I felt more that things were cumbersome to set in motion, with the expectation of more, cascading approvals. And so, after 15 years, I couldn't see myself doing another 20 in the same conditions' (Emile).
>
> '[The new boss] had values of performance, of...capitalist, what have you.' (Tia)

At the same time as Marie and Emile's sense of meaning at work is eroding, their relationships with others are deteriorating, impacting on their sense of meaning at work.

> Even if after [the stalker's departure], we got back together with our colleagues, but it wasn't the same. He broke something" (Emile).
>
> ' He [the new boss] is 'You do this, you do that'. He was in charge [...] I felt bad. [...] When the last of the people I'd worked with left, there wasn't much left. [...] I collapsed. I had a major burn-out' (Tia).

The loss of meaning and lack of social support pushed Marie to the point of no return. Emile no longer felt able to continue working under these conditions.

3. *Clustering "*New projects and their implementation as sources of meaning *"*.

This last theme looks at how the participants give meaning to their new professional project in the second half of their lives. It also identifies the different sources of meaning present in the realization of the project, in this case the period of training required by each to become a psychologist. While some sources of meaning are shared by all three, others concern only one or two participants.

3.1. "Usefulness of work" theme

All the participants agreed on the usefulness of the psychologist's profession:

> I have an obvious feeling of usefulness [...] I realize that I'm very much in demand, because the context means that...there's a real need for all this support for all the professionals who are encountering difficulties...' (Edwige)
>
> I want to work again, to help people. I really want to contribute to people's well-being, if I can help them find a job' (Tia)
>
> I told myself that this job had meaning and was useful to people. It had been useful to me, so it could be useful to others' (Emile)

For Emile, it's a question of retraining for a profession that enables her to help children with different neuropsychological functioning, so that they don't go through what she had experienced in the first part of her life.

> It was [the neuropsychological assessment] that opened my eyes to my strengths and weaknesses [...] I said to myself that, at 48, this was the job I wanted to do, because I felt I'd been missing out on myself for over 40 years [...] And I said to myself, but all these children who are missing out on their strengths, it's not possible'.

Practicing during internships allows us to feel useful even before graduation. Emile recounts a moving anecdote when she was able to advise a mother and her child who came for a neuropsychological consultation:

> At the end, she thanked me and my tutor. She said, "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" And then the boy who was 10, he got up and took us both in his arms and said thank you [...] I had stars in my eyes [...] that alone cheers us up for days and days.'

3.2. Meaning of the project

The meaning of the project brings together different sub-themes: legitimacy, professional and personal maturity, relationship with others, joy of knowing, therapeutic meaning,

For Edwige, being a graduate means not only being able to legitimately practice the profession she is doing, but also attaining the status that goes with it, thus achieving her latest career goal. *"It's category A for a psychologist [...] That's what [professional recognition] is all about [...] It's...recognizing myself as a psychologist.'*

Becoming a psychologist is proof of her professional and personal maturity:*I think it's the culmination of a whole process of maturation, professional and personal maturity. I don't think it's easy to be a psychologist at 20 or 25, to deal with people's distress or anger [...] for me, becoming a psychologist means realizing that I'm mature now, that I know myself well and that whatever I may feel later [...] I can deal with with serenity, which I could never have done at 20, 30, even 40.' (Emile)*

For Emile, this project is helping to transform his relationship with others:*'...before, I was really wild [...] so it suited me well to be alone, in the fields, to have as little contact with people as possible. Today [...] I still like being alone [...] but I also like going out to meet people, and it's better that way with this job.*

Her studies allowed Emile to quench her thirst for knowledge and acquire the understanding she lacked of how people functioned. The more self-confident she became, the better she was able to assert herself and reach out to others.

As far as Tia is concerned, her training had a therapeutic aim before becoming a professional path, in parallel with another training course: '...it *was first and foremost to look after myself, as I was suffering from depression [...] I found meaning there because I was in a gestalt therapy clinic, which is what I really wanted to do. In parallel with work and organizational psychology, well, I found meaning because it was totally in line with my career path.*

Discussion

This study explores the subjective experience of senior workers engaged in significant professional projects during the last phase of their careers. The aim is to examine the potential links between the pursuit of professional goals and these individuals' perception of the meaning of life and work. To this end, we adopted the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which enabled us to conduct information-rich semi-structured interviews. During these interviews, the participants shared their personal stories, detailed their career paths and the genesis of their project, highlighting their subjective experience and the meaning they found in it.

One of the main themes to emerge from the analysis is how mid-life changes influence the construction of meaning. Marieand Emile, for example, went through periods of intense questioning and evaluation of their past and present, a process similar to that described by Martela and Steger (2016). Their experience reflects an existential crisis marked by a lack of meaning in the dimensions of direction, meaning and coherence, as indicated by Bernaud (2021). In Edwige's case, steady progress with clear goals gave a sense of direction to her career, but with maturity, the desire to become a psychologist re-emerged, becoming her main goal for the last phase of her career.

Our study also reveals the mechanisms by which meaning is destroyed. In Emile's case, this involved a decline in perceived usefulness and interest in tasks, while Marie experienced a mismatch between her personal values and those of her managers. In both cases, deteriorating interpersonal relations have affected the meaning of work. However, they are seeking to avoid these pitfalls in their new projects, by focusing on factors likely to provide the meaning they lacked. Edwige, for her part, has followed her long-suppressed professional aspirations, motivated by a need for coherence and recognition.

This study confirms our initial hypotheses. The development of a new professional project not only contributed to the meaning of the participants' work and life, but also had a positive impact on their general well-being. This aligns with the logotherapy perspective, emphasizing the importance of meaning-seeking (Frankl, 2017). The participants saw their projects as stimulating challenges, giving them a reason to mobilize their energy and open up new horizons.

Despite the satisfaction they find in their current work, the participants remain aware of the need to set limits to preserve their health and life balance.

Limits

This research was designed with a limited number of participants to adhere to the IPA methodology. Although this selection based on accessibility and availability enabled common themes to emerge, the lack of diversity, particularly in terms of gender, limits the generalizability of the results. In addition, the fact that the interviews were held at the end of the day may have influenced participants' ability to provide thoughtful responses. Finally, our lack of experience with IPA may have affected the overall quality of the study.

Perspectives

This study reveals that questioning the meaning of life and work is essential to understanding and meeting the needs of senior workers at the end of their careers. In exploring this concept, we recognize that meaning goes beyond immediate satisfaction or material rewards, and includes a profound quest for alignment between work, personal values, passions and the individual's worldview.

Taking meaning into account in the workplace brings significant benefits for both individuals and organizations. For older people, it means finding work that resonates with their identity and aspirations, leading to greater job satisfaction, better mental health and a more engaging contribution. For employers, encouraging this search for meaning can result in a more motivated workforce, increased retention of experienced talent, and a diversity of experience and perspectives within the company.

In addition, challenging stereotypes about age and seniors' ability to learn or adapt is crucial. By creating a space where older workers can reflect on their career paths and future goals, employers can promote a more inclusive and dynamic workplace, where the richness of life experiences is valued.

It is also important for companies to recognize and support the ambitions of older workers, by offering them suitable opportunities for personal and professional development. This can include ongoing training programs, career retraining opportunities, or roles that enable them to make a significant contribution in line with their interests and skills.

Finally, this study highlights that employers can play an active role in facilitating the quest for meaning for older employees, by adopting policies and practices that promote life balance and offer opportunities for meaningful engagement. Such initiatives can not only improve employee well-being, but also strengthen the organization's overall culture and performance.

Thus, questioning meaning in the working lives of older people is not just a beneficial approach for the individual, but an essential organizational strategy. By adopting this perspective, employers can not only maximize the potential of their

senior workforce, but also create a more fulfilling, productive and resilient work environment.

Conclusion

The results of our study reveal that advancing in age and career cycle leads to a shift in the needs and priorities of female participants, prompting them to seek new goals. The development of an innovative professional project, as part of an overall life project, is strongly influenced by their quest for meaning. The realization of this project brings a significant improvement in their perception of the meaning of life and work.

This finding underlines the importance of seniors continuing to set goals and design projects, especially in this phase of their careers. This enhances their well-being, contributes to a positive self-image and makes them more resilient in the face of rapid change in the professional world and societal ageism.

It is also interesting to note that adults in the second half of life show an ability to commit to demanding projects, such as long university studies. This observation calls into question stereotypes linked to age and learning, opening up new perspectives for continuing education, especially in a context where the duration of the second half of careers is lengthening as the retirement age rises.

Although our idiosyncratic methodological approach limits the generalizability of the results, the study highlights the importance for employers and society of creating a supportive environment that enables senior workers to find continued meaning in their work. It thus provides some answers to the challenges of employing and managing older workers in organizations.

It is essential, however, to recognize seniors' desire for a better work-life balance. Some participants are prepared to invest a great deal of effort in achieving their final professional goals, but then aspire to rebalance their lives to give more space to their personal and social activities.

For future research, it would be enriching to broaden the study of goals pursued beyond the professional sphere, to include commitments in associative, political, artistic and other fields. This would enable us to better understand how the pursuit of various aspirations - professional and personal - contributes to the meaning of seniors' lives and influences their transition to retirement. In addition, it would be relevant to explore these issues with more diverse samples in terms of gender, socio-professional and cultural background.

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