It's never too late to learn

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Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to review the changing demographics of employment and it proceeds to critically examine the existing literature on later-career workers' experiences of training and development. Population ageing in developed economies has significant implications for workplace learning, given suggestions that most occupational learning for later-career workers occurs on-the-job within the workplace. The literature suggests that later-career workers receive very little formal occupational training. However, significant gaps are revealed in the existing research knowledge of the extent and nature of older workers learning particularly with regard to incidental learning in the workplace.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative empirical investigation has been conducted among later-career managerial workers and the visual elicitation methodology adopted is detailed.

Findings – The results of the investigation show how the later-career managers in question were learning extensively, albeit incidentally, from workplace challenges specifically those associated with their responsibilities and from interacting with their managers, teams and external stakeholders.

Originality/value – The article draws conclusions for policymakers and those tasked with ensuring the continued learning and development of an ageing workforce.

Keywords Informal learning, Ageing workforce, Later career learning, Visual elicitation methods

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The future of the workplace is grey. Workers classified as later-career workers, that is, those over the age of 50, currently comprise 20 per cent of the European workforce and will represent 30 per cent by the end of the current decade (Fenwick, 2012a). The principal causes of workforce ageing can be attributed to improving life expectancy and the need to manage the worker–pensioner dependency ratio by extending working lives. Drawing upon projections from Eurostat, Barabasch *et al.* (2012, p. 310) noted that whereas, in 2011, the ratio of those considered to be of prime working age people to those over 65 was four to one, by 2060, the ratio is forecast to be just two to one. The weakening of many private pension schemes and a general trend in developed economies to delay access to state provided pensions is estimated to mean that "50-80 per cent" of the current workforce "will delay retirement for economic reasons" (Fredericksen, 2006, p. 131). However, there is some evidence that workers are also positively "wishing to participate more and for longer" (Billett *et al.*, 2011, p. 1250). Workers perceive benefits of working later such as an extended life-expectancy compared to those retiring early (Harford, 2014).

That workers are working later and that organisations in developed economies are increasingly competing on the basis of value-adding knowledge work, so continuous learning for all regardless of age would seem to be a requirement. However, Kyndt *et al.* (2009, p. 376), found "significant differences" in the non-formal and informal learning experiences of employees of different age groups. Older workers have been found to be

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50 per cent less likely to participate in occupational training and development than younger workers (Phillipson, 2009), and as employers look to maximise their rate of return from investments in training, the older employee might seem like a weak investment prospect (Aldridge and Tuckett, 2009). Moreover, it has been reported that older workers are "set in their ways" and only worth training as a "last resort" (Taylor *et al.*, 2010, p. 374; Findsen and Formosa, 2011, p. 80).

However, Fenwick (2012a, p. 203) found that whilst later-career workers may, as a result of such stereotyping, be given few opportunities to participate in formal development activity, they by no means withdraw from learning. Rather, later-career workers were found to be highly active, although strategic, in "what, when and how they engaged" with learning. Similarly, McNair's (2010, pp. 38-39) a meta-analysis of large-scale surveys of workplace learning revealed no diminution of motivation for learning on the part of later-career workers.

However, as it will be seen, significant gaps have been identified in the existing empirical literatures of learning for later-career workers (for example, Lammintakanen and Kivinen, 2012), and the aims of this paper are therefore empirical. The specific research question addressed in this article is: "What is the extent and nature of learning of later-career middle-managers?" Middle-manager participants were selected as an exemplifying sample being in roles requiring the initiation and implementation of change, that is, in roles where it might be expected that learning would be a requirement of their work. Moreover, these middle-managers exemplify knowledge workers at a time when the UK economy is increasingly being characterised as a knowledge economy (Brinkley *et al.*, 2009).

The paper now proceeds by reviewing existing research to define the key terms used and then outlines the established empirical evidence on the extent and nature of learning experienced by later-career workers. Certain significant gaps in this evidence will be highlighted. The paper will then detail the empirical investigation undertaken before proceeding to present findings of the realities of learning for later-career managers. Conclusions will be drawn and recommendations made for the policy and practice of workplace learning.

Existing research

An initial hurdle facing those researching the working and learning experiences of older workers is defining exactly what is meant by older workers or, to use our preferred term, later-career workers. The threshold age for defining "older" workers ranges from 45 and above, to 55 and above (Billett and Van Woerkom, 2008; Luger *et al.*, 2012; Angotti and Belmonte, 2012). Moreover, considerable debate surrounds whether age is a biological, personal-psychological, economic, historical or socio-cultural construct (Hodkinson, 2010). Thus, different definitions of older worker characterise different national and organisational cultures and different industries. In the current research, the pragmatic definition adopted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Luger *et al.*, 2012, p. 256) has been applied, whereby workers in the second half of their working lives are regarded as later-career workers.

A second definitional hurdle of concern to research of this nature is defining learning. As McNair (2010, p. 18) noted, learning can range from "courses to conversations". In other words, learning can range from the formal experience of being taught and assessed to the highly informal experience of learning as a part of everyday living such

as reflecting on experiences. Hodkinson (2010, p. 100) thus asserted that "learning is ubiquitous throughout life" with much learning being "unintentional". The distinction between deliberative or purposeful learning associated with formal training and education and unintentional, implicit, learning associated with workplace experiences is particularly important when considering later-career workers' experiences as will become apparent in this review and in the findings that follow.

As has been noted, "the distribution of training opportunities […] varies by age" (Felstead, 2011, p. 204). Not only do workers over the age of 55 receive less than half the amount of training of younger workers (Phillipson, 2009, p. 118), but the length and quality of training experienced has been found to diminish with age. Billet and Van Woerkom (2008, p. 336) thus concluded that "workplace support" for training "is exercised selectively and, it seems, often parsimoniously towards older workers". This lack of participation in training by later-career workers has been explained in terms of demand and supply factors such as a depleted personal motivation for learning (Bertolino *et al.*, 2011, p. 250; Felstead, 2011, p. 197; Van Vianen *et al.*, 2011) and occupational characteristics such as professional status or seniority, task demands and promotional avenues (Kyndt *et al.*, 2009; McNair, 2010; Ahlgren and Engel, 2011; Angotti and Belmonte, 2012).

By contrast to the studies reporting a lowered motivation for training in later-careers, other studies find that learning-motivation increases with age (Brimrose and Brown, 2010; Pitt-Catsouphes *et al.*, 2011). These latter findings suggest later-career workers likely receptivity to training and such receptivity are reported in specific circumstances such as where the training enables the deepening of existing knowledge and the fuller utilisation of existing skills (Canning, 2011; Fenwick, 2012a). Further explanations of later-career learning motivation include the degree to which the training offered was self-initiated (Van Vianen *et al.*, 2011, p. 240), enhanced employability (McNair, 2012, p. 8), assuaged a sense of ageing (Barabasch *et al.*, 2012, p. 314; Fenwick, 2012b, p. 1011), extended social networks (Angotti and Belmonte, 2012, p. 78; DeBaets and Warmoes, 2012, p. 142) and was satisfying and enjoyable (Jenkins, 2012, p. 96).

Preferences for forms of learning have been found to change over the course of a career. Whereas engagement with formal training may well decline over the course of a career (Canning, 2011, p. 668), Berg and Chyung (2008) reported that as age increased, so did engagement with informal learning activities (see also, Barabasch *et al.*, 2012). Thus Brimrose and Brown (2010, p. 193) found that for older-workers, "the major form of engagement with learning" was informally through work experiences (see also, Tullius, 2012; Fuller and Unwin, 2005). Whereas Felstead's (2011, p. 193) research revealed that older worker-respondents to a large scale *Learning at Work Survey* reported that they had "relatively limited access" to such informal learning from work itself.

Both Fenwick (2012a) and Luger *et al.* (2012) have recently reported that later-career workers engage with a wide range of activities and resources with potential for learning. Specifically, Fuller and Unwin (2005, p. 30) reported that later-career workers' learning was attributable to two principal sources. Firstly, the "job itself" and, secondly, "others in the workplace" with 85 and 69 per cent of their respondents, respectively, noting these as the key sources of "needing what I need to know in my job". DeGeest and Brown (2011, p. 168) identified "five task characteristics that make work experiences developmentally challenging". These characteristics were: unfamiliar responsibilities, high levels of responsibility, creating change, working across boundaries and managing

diversity. "Increased autonomy" (DeCroo, 2014) and problem-solving have also been found to be key learning sources for older workers (Luger *et al.*, 2012, p. 271).

While increased autonomy affords an individual informal learning opportunity, such learning can also be understood socially using the metaphors of learning as acquisition or as participation (Sfard, 1998). Firstly, assuming that learning is a process of acquisition, the social learning theory developed by Bandura (1977) emphasised the importance of interpersonal learning through the modelling of observed behaviours, resulting in the acquisition of knowledge or skill. Secondly, assuming that learning is a process of effective participation in social practices, the socio-cultural situated learning theory, associated with Lave and Wenger (1991), postulated that individuals learn within communities of practice through legitimate peripheral participation, resulting in the progressive "appropriation" of the community's ways of knowing and of being, that is, of appropriating a particular identity (Nicolini, 2013). In this latter view, knowledge and ways of knowing are understood as social constructions within specific situations (Fenwick, 2013).

However, the limited empirical evidence of older workers' learning presents a mixed picture as to the importance of social learning. The results of both Felstead (2011) and Lammintakanen and Kivinen's (2012) studies show that compared to younger employees, older employees are more likely to learn independently than socially. By contrast, Brimrose and Brown (2010, p. 186) showed that for their case-study older employee, learning derived particularly from his "inter-organisational and non-hierarchical teamwork as well as rich and varied interactions with other employees, managers, suppliers, customers and members of the supply chain". "Personal networks" were also of importance for this worker. Canning (2011, p. 671) thus concluded that learning for older workers "is a social practice that involves sharing prior knowledge and experience" and learning "through and with others". Whereas younger workers are typically depicted as learners in mentoring relationships, it has also been noted that being a mentor results in particularly valuable learning for older workers. It is suggested that this process develops understanding of new perspectives and ideas for the mentor (Ropes, 2011).

This brief review of the literature has been dependent upon the limited number of sources of relevance for examining later-career learning. Indeed, as Fenwick (2012a, p. 1006) noted, "there are few published studies" of older professionals' participation in learning or of how such workers conceptualise their learning (see also Findsen and Formosa, 2011). Moreover, informal, workplace learning tends to be under-reported in the survey research, which has thus far characterised the field, and the perspectives of later-career employees themselves are largely neglected (Collin *et al.*, 2008, p. 192; Van Vianen *et al.*, 2011, pp. 226-227). The research gap is particularly apparent with regard to later-career workers' social learning. Barabasch *et al.* (2012, p. 315) thus noted that "empirically […] very little is known about […] social factors" in learning. In particular, in reviewing the empirical evidence, Fenwick (2012a, p. 208) noted a "collective call for nuanced and differentiated research" to understand how older workers themselves approach learning. Therefore, the field is ripe for further empirical research, and gaps and weaknesses in the literature have informed the formulation of the research question. In what follows the empirical study undertaken to overcome such shortcomings in established research is detailed, and findings are then presented which contribute to completing some of the identified gaps.

The empirical study

A qualitative and largely inductive methodological approach was adopted, aligning with the exploratory aim of the research. A cross-sectional research design involved purposively sampled middle-manager participants who were selected as an exemplifying case (Yin, 2014). Recruitment of these participants was based upon them meeting the key criteria of being "later-career" workers using the definition of being aged over 50 and holding a middle-management role. This paper reports the findings from ten quite different participant managers. Half of these participants were private sector managers and the other half were public/not-for-profit sector managers. Some were from professional backgrounds such as social work, police and engineering, while the remainder were more general career managers with such responsibilities as business development, project management and quality assurance. Three of the participants were female.

The informal, incidental, tacit and social nature of much workplace learning poses methodological challenges in ascertaining from respondents exactly what they have learnt and particularly, how their learning has occurred (Fuller and Unwin, 2005; McNair, 2013). Therefore, visual elicitation techniques were deployed in advance of interviews to assist participants in exploring such tacit learning accomplishments and implicit learning processes. Three visual techniques were used:

(1) *Timelines*: Participants were requested to depict their work over the preceding five years as a horizontal line showing the degree of change, and learning, as gradients on that line against a vertical axis scaled from "set backs" through "stability" to "rapid".

(2) *Sociograms*: Participants were requested to indicate whom they interacted with over a typical month, the nature of this interaction (e.g. face-to-face or electronically) and how significant they felt these interactions were for them.

(3) *Pictors*: Participants were asked to produce a visual representation of how they viewed themselves in their social worlds, in response to the question "How do I see myself as a later-career manager?"

The interviews then focussed upon the participant-generated visuals rather than upon predetermined questions compiled by the researchers. Prompt questions, derived on the fly, were used as necessary to clarify the researchers' understandings of the participants' narratives. However, these were limited as far as possible to ensure that participants' meanings of their learning as a later-career managers were prioritised (Willig, 2008). Through enabling participants to reflect upon their learning in advance this method, rich and considered personal narratives were elicited. The interviews, which varied in length from 45-102 minutes, were recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts, comprising over 256,500 words, formed the main data set for analysis. A multi-staged inductive analytical approach was adopted. Initially, themes were induced from the data independently by each of the two researchers. These two coding-sets were then compared and contrasted, enabling a final agreed set of theme-codes to be established. These agreed themes were subsequently refined and organised through iteration with established findings and concepts. This iterative process of constant revision enabled themes to be compared and, where appropriate,

integrated into more developed and explanatory categories. A final set of categories were established which included "responding to legal and policy changes" and "informal networking with colleagues".

Research standards

Care was taken to ensure that at all stages the research conformed to accepted standards for contemporary qualitative inquiry (Tracy, 2010). Thus, for example, while relatively small, the sample provided a good diversity of experiences and through the data analysis "category saturation" was achieved. Additionally, throughout the analysis process, researcher influences were reflexively examined to ensure that interpretations stayed close to the data and that discrepant cases were considered (Silverman, 2011).

Findings

The data illustrate the diverse and complex sources of learning experienced by the later-career middle-manager participants, and key findings from the interviews are detailed below. However, the following vignette, Andrea's tale, provides an introductory overview, deriving the interview with one participant, of the experiences of later-career learning evident in the accounts of most participants.

Vignette: Andrea's tale

Andrea is a city council manager aged in her early-50s. An accountant by training, she is currently a Project Manager. In her mid-40s, Andrea had decided to take the opportunity offered to her by her employers, of pursuing an MBA. However, since completing this course, "the training budget has been completely hacked". Nonetheless, Andrea admitted that she had not proactively sought out further formal courses, conceding that from formal courses she had "learnt an awful lot that I didn't need to learn and that I've forgotten since". Nonetheless, austerity and the subsequent lack of opportunities for course participation had, Andrea suggested, constrained the learning available to her. Moreover, she felt that learning opportunities had been further limited through the significant changes brought about in city administration recently as a result of austerity, notably more top-down decision-making and accountability and work overload. Andrea thus explained how "cos everyone's under the thumb […] you just do what you're told". However, despite the perceived lack of learning opportunities, Andrea was clearly experiencing personal development through significant informal learning helped by her desire to "discover new things", to "stretch myself a bit" and by a naturally reflective disposition. Andrea considered that her years of experience allowed her to learn reflectively through being "more prepared ask the seemingly daft question". In addition to such personal experiential learning, Andrea spoke of the importance of "developing informal connections" and reflected on the significance of such connections for learning noting that,"you look at what others' do and you ask yourself 'how and why'?" Andrea further reflected that throughout her career she had been constantly "doing things that I'd never done before […] learning on the fly". Andrea noted that while traditionally in the context of a city council she would now be near retirement age, in the current context "I could be here until I'm 68". Therefore, she felt that "if something comes along, I will have a go". However, Andrea had to some extent accepted the limits to her remaining working life, concluding that "what you've got to remember is everyone has a shelf-life".

Motivation for learning

Many of the manager-participants directly asserted that the contemporary world of management required continuous manager learning. Participants referred to the need to be "flexible", "adaptable" and "proactive". There was a general sense of the need to assume personal responsibility for learning and participants were motivated for personal learning for two typical reasons. Employability was a one typical reason with a participant noting, for instance, that:

> I had the sense to work myself out of that role.

Another typical reason pertained to personal interest, with a participant observing that learning new things through undertaking:

> Projects and initiatives"maintained her"interest in the job.

Indicators of a strong motivation for learning included substantial evidence of personal reading to resolve workplace problems and a general interest in finding new ways of undertaking established activities. However, formal training did not feature significantly in these managers' experiences, and this is partly explained by Andrea's view of such activities. Despite these perceptions, participants' lack of engagement in formal learning activities was, as is emphasised in Andrea's tale, largely down to the decreased availability of training opportunities. However, there was no evidence to suggest that this lack of opportunity resulted from their career stage. It was, rather, as Andrea reported, largely attributable to the prevailing economic climate. This climate had, for the public sector managers in particular, resulted in more top-down decision-making and increased accountability. Opportunities for learning experientially from experimentation were thus restricted as Andrea's tale reveals.

Extent and sources of informal, experiential learning

Despite the limits to both formal learning and to certain sources of informal learning, the participants' motivation for learning meant that other sources of informal learning were embraced and actively sought. As is clearly evident in Andrea's tale, learning was actively being sought both inside and outside of her work.

The data show the considerable extent of informal learning achieved by the participants and many participants specifically spoke of both their reliance on such experiential learning and on the need to take personal responsibility for ensuring that such learning happened. One participant, for instance, noted the "rich feast" of learning contained within his normal job role. That the managers recognised the value of day-to-day experiences as learning opportunities was illustrated by an emphasis upon the importance of reflection. In the words of one manager:

> You keep doing it, making mistakes and watching other people do it and make different mistakes from you, but as a result you are always learning.

Such reflection could have been attributable to the participants' MBA training. However, Andrea's statement that she was now "more prepared ask the seemingly daft question", mirrors the sentiment of many participants. Such challenging questioning suggests that a reflective disposition was a consequence of participants being in the later stage of their careers with less to lose by rocking the boat.

An overview of the specific sources of informal learning appears in Figure 1. The bar lengths and shading indicate both the proportion of responses coded and the intensity of those responses within each category.

Virtually, all participants were experiencing substantial learning as a result of workplace changes that they were responding to or initiating themselves. Public sector participants typically noted an accelerating rate of change attributable to policy initiatives from the national government and from ever tightening audit and inspection regimes. Private sector participants typically noted increased turbulence in market competition. Whereas, cuts in budgets and austerity were, as noted earlier, causing caution and potentially inhibiting learning for some participants, for the majority such measures were enabling learning. One participant thus noted:

> This is actually a very fertile environment for learning because you have no resources and you have to make miracles happen through creative thinking and new ways of doing things.

A further source of learning derived from evolving responsibilities. A majority of participants described how their role was "morphing" naturally over time and one captured this challenge with the observation that:

> I now have this multiplicity of responsibilities which has made me learn new skills and pick up different things. It has been a really steep learning curve and I've found myself way out of my comfort zone.

This learning from new experiences is evidenced in Andrea's sense of always having to learn "on the fly".

In recounting the challenges in their work, participants referred to a broad range of specific experiences with potential for learning. Such experiences ranged from everyday

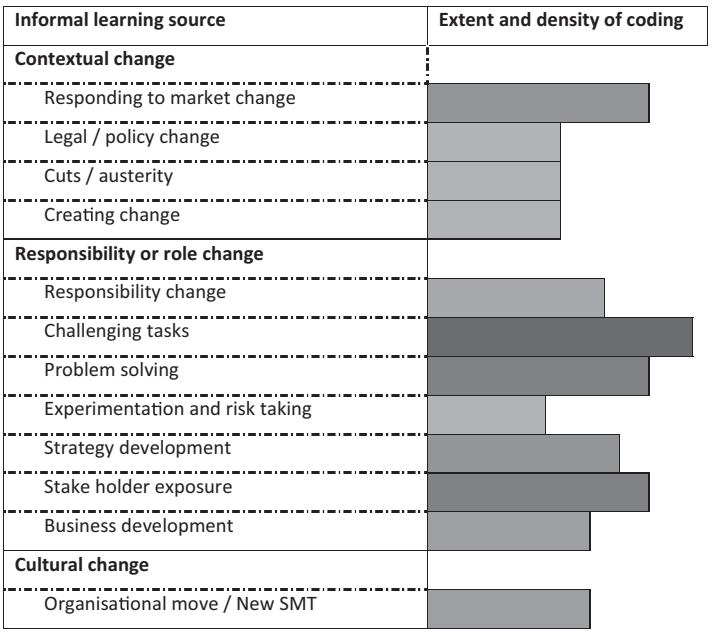

Figure 1.
Sources of experiential learning identified

"fire-fighting" and "mistakes", "risk-taking" and "experimentation" through to resolving "complex, interrelated problems" and "achieving a business turnaround". That the learning potential inherent in such experiences was typically realised is evidenced by the incidence of personal reflection noted earlier and by a not unusual remark from one participant that:

> Through reviewing our mistakes we learn and move on.

Most participants reported experiencing significant changes to the very purpose of their job within recent years with such changes involving "learning aplenty". Two such changes are widely evident. Firstly, certain participants had been directed to take on totally new areas of responsibility. Thus, one manager wryly reflected:

> I said, "well I know absolutely nothing about finance and procurement", but I sort of knew that wouldn't matter one jot. So I said, "yes I would like the opportunity".

Secondly, other participants experienced a shift from operational responsibilities to strategic responsibilities:

> The nature of my role has shifted from responsibility for people and delivery to being much more concerned with strategy and policy development.

A similar increase in responsibility arose for many participants from greater exposure to external stakeholders or from assuming responsibility for business development.

A common learning outcome arising from such higher level responsibilities in particular was encapsulated by one participant in his observation that:

> I've had to progress from someone who is empowered by his role to someone who is empowered by his credibility.

Virtually, all the participants had not only experienced such changes but had also moved jobs with many also switching organisations. As an example of a job change within the same organisation, one participant noted:

> I'm in yet another new job and experiencing all the learning that you associate with being in a new job.

However, even in the cases of those participants who stayed in the same job, a change of organisational configuration such as the requirement for joined-up, "cross-silo", working or the arrival of new senior management offered learning opportunities. With regard to the latter, for example, one participant was typical in reflecting:

> With the new private investors we had a change of leadership […] that was real learning for me as it was a completely different style of management […] a different culture.

Extent and sources of social learning

Informal day-to-day workplace learning was not just an individual endeavour but was often a social process. The participant managers were typically learning through and with others within their work as Andrea's tale evidences. Figure 2 provides an analytical overview of the social learning sources reported by the participants. As for Figure 1, the bars illustrate both the proportion of responses coded and the intensity of these responses.

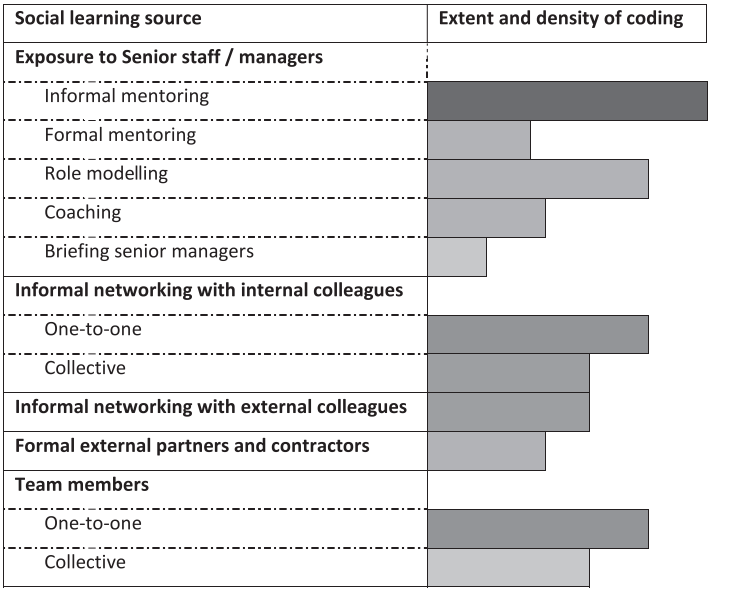

Figure 2.
Social sources of learning identified

While formal mentoring rarely featured, the accounts of all of these later-career managers reveal how more senior colleagues had contributed to their learning through informal mentoring. This mentoring was significant for participants' learning how to behave as middle-managers as well as for their longer-term career development, acting as a form of legitimate peripheral participation into the community of practice of more senior management (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

For some participants, informal mentoring was central to their learning higher-level capabilities such as strategy-making. As one public sector manager explained, her interactions with one of her senior managers were about:

> Encouraging me to get involved, giving me tasks that he knew would stretch me […] and this is one reason why I've became as senior as I have. He brought me up, helped me to learn where we're going and what the senior management are looking at as a corporate body rather than just what happens in individual departments.

For many of the managers, the learning outcomes from informal mentoring were less tangible but can be seen to have been shaping their identities as managers as suggested by the situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Thus, for instance, one participant noted how his self-selected informal mentor had made him realise the importance of developing internal networks and of building a profile within the organisation. He explained that as a result:

> I learned how to have great conversations with the 'C' suite: the chief actuary, chief finance officer, CEO.

Senior managers also acted as influential role models and with similar identity building outcomes. Thus, one participant's remarked that:

> I've picked up a lot of stuff from the CEO. It's hard to articulate what I've learned. I guess it's his attitude, his behaviours. I've learned a lot from his style. I use these now.

More specific outcomes from role modelling arose from participants' mirroring or building upon their managers' behaviours, as suggested by the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). Thus, for example, managers learnt how to deal effectively with people-management problems through observing their managers' careful listening and the weighing of evidence.

However, in some instances, more senior managers were perceived as negative role models, reminding them of "what not to do". As an example, a private sector manager explained how a manager:

> Had a very unusual style. He created conflict. He would literally pull somebody apart. You just wondered who it was going to be next and hoped it wasn't you.

Participants also typically experienced coaching from senior managers. For instance, one of these managers reported how through being coached by a senior manager he had learned how to more effectively engender change by taking into account the receptivity of staff for change.

Significantly, these managers were not always learning *from* their senior managers. Sometimes their learning arose *with* their senior managers, with knowledge being socially constructed (Fenwick, 2013). As an example, one of the public sector managers explained how:

> I wrote the housing strategy for the city which he's got to take forward. So he said "you'd better tell me something about this, you know". I learnt a lot in doing that.

Interaction with and networking among internal colleagues were important sources of learning for these managers, as is illustrated both within Figure 2 and through Andrea's tale.

This learning did not just involve acquiring knowledge to resolve problems but also the social-construction of knowledge. For instance, one manager commented that:

> We've got common challenges […] we can solve them better together.

Working-relationships with external partners or contractors were also important sources of learning. One participant provided a specific example of this source of learning, describing a recent situation he had faced. He explained:

> We've had a real problem with vagrants. There were a couple of charities involved all working independently and duplicating work. So I said 'look, let's all work together to find a solution. The problems have reduced by 50 per cent now and it's a completely different way from how it was done before.

The participants were also learning through interactions with their reporting teams. Thus, one participant described how upon taking on his current management role, he had:

> Gone out with the lads, shadowed them, seen how they work with politicians, with neighbourhood managers; how and when they get involved. It's the best way to get to know the ropes.

One of the most unforeseen findings was how certain of these managers learnt from role-modelling their subordinates. One such manager explained how:

> Kevin's very good at communication. I've observed him a few times in meetings, and I've learned quite a bit from that […]. Darren's very good at people management, very motivating. I've leant from his style.

Some such interactions prompted the managers to reflect and to, again, learn something of the identity of a manager, that is, how to *be* a manager. One participant was typical of others in explaining how he had needed to:

> Discover and learn how to actually – be– a manager of this team of managers, that is, how to behave "in the round" as a manager at this level.

Finally, while it is normally assumed that it is the mentee or coachee who learns from these processes, it was clear that providing such support had enabled these managers to learn for themselves, through reflecting upon their own practice. As one of participant explained:

> I've been forced into thinking about how the mechanisms I've just implemented really work.

In sum, therefore, the participant later-career managers were learning little from formal human resource development (HRD) interventions and such interventions were, in any case, seen to be diminishing. However, the managers were clearly learning extensively but on an informal basis from their reflective responses to workplace challenges and from social interactions with their colleagues and with organisational partners and stakeholders.

Conclusions

DeCroo (2014) proposed that the challenge of an ageing workforce needs to be "tackled […] from another angle" than has conventionally been the case (n.p). Specifically, he argued for "a new and positive narrative […] that defies the negativity and transforms our ageing populations from a problem into an asset" (n.p). Ageing populations need to be seen as a key, growing, natural asset rather than, as typically construed today, a liability.

The findings reported above support a tentative conclusion that later-career workers can, indeed, be seen as a growing asset. It can be concluded that personal growth through continued learning, deriving largely from informal learning sources, might characterise the working lives of those, such as the sample of middle-managers in this research, who have a degree of responsibility and for whom workplace-change is a constant. Given that such features of work are becoming endemic, entrenched assumptions about later-career workers' lack of learning might thus need to be challenged. The findings suggest that later-career workers might well have concerns about their employability and diminished onwards and upwards career prospects. However, it was clear that all of these later-career workers were motivated by their work. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that occupational learning will be resisted.

However, the established evidence that later-career workers experience a decrease in formal learning opportunities such as training courses, is verified by the findings although in this particular case, participants attributed the decrease to the specific circumstances of the prevailing economic climate rather than their age.

The findings also support Fenwick's (2012a) discovery from research among professionals that informal learning opportunities more than compensate for any lack of formal learning opportunities. Specifically, the findings of Fuller and Unwin (2005) and

McNair (2010) that older workers experience two principal sources of learning, namely, the job itself and others in the workplace are confirmed and extended. The established literature has shown the potential learning inherent in change (DeGeest and Brown, 2011; Lammintakanen and Kivinen, 2012), and on the basis of the current findings, it can be specifically concluded that changes in job responsibilities, in job roles and in the contexts of the organisation provide substantial informal learning opportunities. However, contrary to certain established findings that older employees are more likely to learn independently than socially (McNair, 2010), the current findings suggest that social learning should be considered significant for those in later-careers. From the perspective of the acquisition metaphor (Sfard, 1998), it was seen that learning from social interactions included one-to-one observation of role models, resulting in the acquisition of new behaviours (Bandura, 1977). Such behaviours were also being acquired through conversations with members of reporting teams, from mentoring junior staff, from personal network contacts and from interactions with external stakeholders. Moreover, social learning understandable from the participatory metaphor was in evidence. Firstly, through informal mentoring, more senior managers were fostering the legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991) of the middle-manager participants into communities-of-practice of senior managers. Secondly, the manager-participants were learning collectively alongside their teams such that new forms of knowledge and practice were emerging through a process of social construction (Fenwick, 2013). Of particular interest, certain of this extensive informal learning extended beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge and ways of knowing to the appropriation of particular attitudes, such as an attitude of openness to experience, that amounted to learning as a process of identity transformation, as suggested by the situated learning theory (Nicolini, 2013).

Certain implications emerge from the conclusions of the current research. However, it must be acknowledged that the workers studied being middle-managers and working as they did for larger organisations might be atypical workers. For example, by the very nature of their management roles, the participants are likely to have been achievement-orientated, have habituated to career-long learning and to have a strong sense of self-efficacy (Maurer, 2001). Moreover, managerial work itself undoubtedly provides more variety and challenge than more typical jobs. Nonetheless, many of the characteristics of knowledge work (Brinkley *et al.*, 2009) typify middle-managers' work, and exactly because these managers exemplify effective later-career learning, broader lessons can be derived from their experiences for later-career workers more generally within a knowledge economy. Both Fenwick (2012a, p. 221) and Canning (2011, p. 675) argued for a "more personalised" approach to learning for those in later-careers and several such lessons for development practice are supported by the current research.

Firstly, later-career workers need to be alerted to the learning potential within their jobs and the capabilities to leverage this potential, such as critically reflective skills, need to be fully developed. As Hodkinson (2010, p. 102) noted, incidental learning can be "enhanced in informed ways [*through*] guidance and support".

Secondly, later-career employees could, as the findings indicate, be encouraged to take roles with greater growth potential through horizontal career moves and roles involving more interaction with colleagues and exposure to a greater range of stakeholders.

Finally, those managing later-career employees need to be encouraged to challenge stereotypical assumptions about such employees and see as yet untapped potential that can be realised through learning-late. In sum, HRD policy and professional practice needs to move rapidly to ensure that later-career workers become a true asset for their organisations and economies.

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