

# The truths about working lives

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# What's ahead

- About me
- Introduction to the project
- How it's going
- What I'm learning
- How and where can this learning best be used?

# About me

Coaching and writing with focus on career and work at 50+

Late starter, non-linear career

Worked 30+ years in HE, across many different areas – library, construction management, museums, archaeology, history of art and architecture, career management and graduate employability, science skills, research impact, change management, planning and strategy ...

Retrained as career coach at 61, left HE career, set up practice

Our topic

# The Working Lives Project

# The original idea

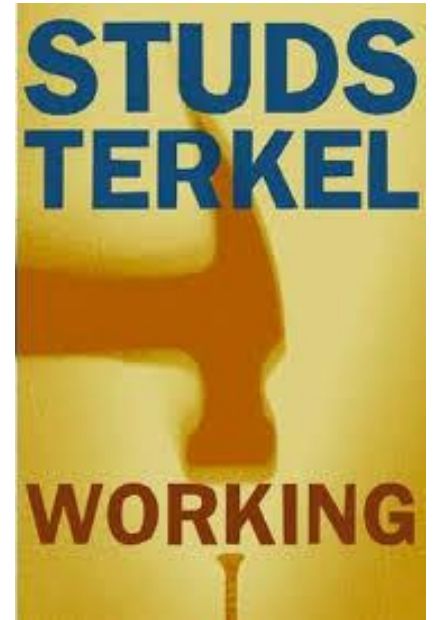
Book about what work looks like at and from 50+

Inspired by and modelled on Studs Terkel's *Working: People talk about what they do all day and how they feel about what they do*

Verbatim interviews (whole or extracted), grouped thematically with commentary at the front

Not case studies – not illustrative – no learning points

Pilot to test my process and prepare book proposal



# The overarching principle

Led by the material ...

- Not cherry-picking quotes to answer a research question
- Not gathering material from which to develop a theory or a model – material is the thing itself, not means to another thing
- Not selecting or presenting interviews as illustrative or representative of anything other than a working life

... but governed by research discipline

# The process

Wrote explanatory blurb about project and pilot phase

Sent to people I knew, people they knew, people I bumped into

Eligibility criteria: 50+, working, happy to talk and be recorded – seeking variety but not exceptionalness; exploring working lives, not careers

Shared broad ideas of what I'm interested in hearing about

Consent forms for clarity and best research practice

Interviewed, recorded, transcribed, edited

# Editorial principles

Minimal intervention and mediation in interview or editing

Scripts checked by interviewees – corrections, deletions, anonymisation

Editorial deletions to manage sensitive material, remove material less related to work and get transcripts down to manageable size

But no changes to what was said, and no additions – everything that remains is verbatim



# What I've learned from the pilot

Learning across three main areas:

- Editorial learning
- The experience for them and for me
- What it does and doesn't tell us about working lives

# Editorial learning

Some key points of editorial learning from the pilot transcripts:

- They're long!
- Therefore, more editing required than anticipated ...
- ... and space for fewer interviews than envisaged
- Ways of handling things that can't be said

# Experiential learning

The experience for them:

- Some anxiety at outset, but generally grateful for opportunity to talk – enjoyable, interesting, revealing, clarifying, cathartic, therapeutic
- Moments of realisation in the interview itself
- Satisfaction with what they've done – few regrets

And for me:

- Fascinating and enlightening, a privilege and a pleasure
- Like coaching, but also not like coaching

## A fresh perspective

Learning more, perhaps, about work *up to* rather than *at* 50+

Talk about ageing or retirement isn't that prominent – using the space to explore what's come before, without agenda

Looking at the past in itself and not in relation to its pertinence in the present

Not packaging past, or future, for purpose of promotion or new job

Not exploring in a therapeutic context, though potentially therapeutic benefits

# What does a 'good' working life look like?

Comparison is pointless; perspective is everything

Impressiveness and success are subjective

A career is lived out in a working life

'Interesting' and 'rewarding' aren't fixed qualities

'Good' comes in very many guises

## Starting points

Early career decidedness takes many forms and has variable outcomes

'Right' and 'wrong' are relative, fluid, mutable

'False starts' take up little space in a 30-40 year working life

Teachers' attitudes may determine the starting point but not the journey

Underperformance in education needn't set a pattern for working life

# Shaping factors

Parental attitudes to work – source of inspiration or something to fight against

Physical and mental health and abilities – visible and hidden influences

Life events and responsibilities and how these are, or aren't, supported

National and global economics and major disruptive events

Time and what it brings

Necessity, opportunity and appetite for variety and experimentation

# The whole truth?

What comes to the surface on a given day

Remembering and misremembering

The benefits and shortcomings of the live, spoken word

Things unsaid and unsayable

Not whole, fixed truths, but ephemeral truths, partial truths, perceived truths, edifying truths

No generalisation or extrapolation allowed



## Next steps

Crack on with interviews – but fewer of them

Prepare proposal and approach publishers

Have a plan B

Think creatively about other outlets

# Over to you

Any questions?

How might the content be useful for your work?

What other audiences might be interested?

Is it a book?!

If not, what could it be?

# Get in touch

Email me at: [rachel@rachelstewartcareers.com](mailto:rachel@rachelstewartcareers.com)

Get in touch through my website:  
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# Learn more

Read my blogs on work, careers and career redesign at 50+ at <https://www.rachelstewartcareers.com/writing>

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