

DON'T STOP THE CAREER CLOCK

Rejecting the Myths of Aging
for a New Way to Work in the 21st Century

H E L E N H A R K N E S S

Author of The Career Chase

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Helen Harkness, Ph.D. © ♦ Career Design Associates, Inc. ♦ (972) 278-4701
options@career-design.com ♦ www.career-design.com

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Epilogue

"We are not "senior citizens" or "golden agers" we are the elders, the experienced ones; we are maturing, growing adults responsible for the survival of our society. We are not wrinkled babies, succumbing to trivial, purposeless waste of our years and our time."

--Maggie Kuhn

Just as there is no automatic system to successfully guide our career for us, there is no prescription for how we are to live our later life. Society and its institutions and professionals are trailing at least ten years behind in dealing with the process and problems of integrating aging and working.

Those of us who are embarking on our first or second midlife are asking ourselves some critical questions: What is the purpose of our later years? Does aging have any intrinsic purpose? Is there work to be done after rearing children? What are the rules, rights, and responsibilities of older people? What are the strengths and virtues of old age? What is a good old age? Who can teach us how to grow old well? How can we deal best with time? Can we expect new thresholds to cross as long as we live?

In order to live successfully, we must believe in that for which we live. We become "old" when our belief system is gone, regardless of our chronological age. The most meaningful thing we can live for is to reach our full potential. We must find and develop the skills we enjoy using and pursue a positive idea of aging. And we must keep on a growth and learning curve.

We need to develop our own positive visions and purpose for our later life. It won't be given to us by our culture; we may get no more than a hint. In the past, we looked outward and surveyed. We accepted decisions without much questioning, confident that the future would be more of the same, a continuing model.

We know now, or are rapidly learning, that this is not the case. We cannot rely on a changeless external environment. Our certainties must be generated from our own internal base, propelled by our own personal success criteria, rather than from relying on a particular condition of the outer work. This is wisdom in action.

As we move to the twenty-first century, from the brawn to the brainware era, a new breed, the free agent who can adapt and deal creatively with complexity and change, will thrive. To make this 180-degree shift at midlife, many must radically rethink their current beliefs about how to age and work. The following list is a summary of important power points for finding a new way to work in the twenty-first century.

- Know what you want, know that you deserve it, and know how to ask for it effectively. Find your purpose and passion and pursue them.

- Focus on active, functional aging by gaining insight into a new concept of time and aging and forgetting rigid chronological passive age.
- Know that understanding yourself and your purpose will anchor you in this age of uncertainty.
- Stay optimistic and maintain a sense of humor--age is much more a state of mind than a number of years.
- Realize that life and work satisfaction based on meaning and motivation is a major factor in increasing longevity.
- Understand that you will likely be living a longer, healthier life than previous generations, and that you need to make the most of these extra vital years.
- See the aging process as a positive time of continuing growth and ascent, focusing on our emerging freedom, options, and choices rather than the current popular image of decline, disarray, and decay.
- View aging, career, and lifestyle threads that you can creatively and consciously weave together in a pattern of your own design.
- Know that a stale, declining career spilling over into your personal life will leave you feeling old and stagnant, regardless of chronological age.
- Avoid the “victim” mentality and stay in control of your life as long as possible.
- Arm yourself with your own unique set of written success criteria for building your work and life.
- See a time of chaos and complexity as a time for renewal and rebirth: seek out the underlying order.
- Identify and discard the myths of aging, half-truths from an earlier age that disrupt and distract from our career.
- Distinguish your “glass balls,” which cannot be dropped without lasting, permanent damage, from the countless “rubber balls,” which are only clutter.
- Constantly ask meaningful and thoughtful “grail questions” to seek and sort out what is really happening in your life and in the world.
- See aging and career planning as a continuing lifetime process.
- Develop latent, dormant characteristics and skills.
- View crisis as an opportunity for you and your family to refocus and move on.
- Realize that ageism is similar to racism and sexism, and the accompanying outdated aging myths, misinformation, and the resulting negative effects frequently are instrumental in turning older adults into mindless children.
- Recognize that you have options and choices for aging successfully. Practice becoming adaptable, alert, and active now and you will grow old that way.
- Know that the creative spirit, far from declining with age, may actually gain in strength and vigor if you concentrate on doing what really matters to you.
- Value and cultivate wisdom--the greatest gift of the human life cycle.
- Believe strongly in that for which you live--the greatest anti-aging secret.
- Be aware that dissatisfaction with retirement can accelerate the aging process.
- Live long--die fast. We will have an additional twenty, even thirty healthy years: we will be “old-old” for a shorter period of time.

- Remember that biological age responds to psychological age. For example, longevity studies reveal that job satisfaction is the most reliable indicator of low risk for heart attack.
- Understand that staying youthful is not about staying chronologically young. The pursuit of youth blinds us to the possibilities of age.
- Realize that aging is a lifetime “work in progress”: we learn how to grow older just as we learned how to grow up.
- Know that the sense of community--the rootedness, belonging, and satisfaction we get from work we enjoy and where we live--is absolutely essential at any age.
- Be authentic: make your real self the same person inside as outside.
- Trust your instincts: beware the tyranny of conventional authority.
- Confront the fear of aging.
- Reject the negative aging stereotypes and paradigms that are pervasive, expected, and accepted today.
- Strive for robust aging, going beyond our current and normal “diseased” aging. Keep in mind that when self-esteem is high we seek success, and when it is low we seek to avoid failure.

Jung assures us that aging has purpose: “A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning to the species to which he belongs. The afternoon of human life must have a significance of its own and cannot be merely a pitiful appendage of life’s morning” (1933, p. 109).

McLeish (1994b) summarizes the journey in late life:

The Ulyssean Sonnet

Naked of funds and power, I now consign
 All my disasters to oblivion.
 All the mischoices that I once called mine
 I now resolve never to think upon.
 What can I do that will undo the past?
 I can review it, mourn it, waste my powers,
 Replay the games no whistle can recast,
 Try to relive the unrelivable hours.
 No--at an age when fools say all is ending
 I consecrate myself to fresh tomorrows,
 Resume the Ulyssean Way I see extending
 Its noble hopes beyond all sins and sorrows.
 I take the Sacred Present and conspire
 To ring the future with Empyrean fire.