

## What Work Looks Like for Women in Their 50s

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“The fifties was the most exciting career decade of my life so far,” says Babette Pettersen, “and it looks like my options are only getting better as I turn 60.” Babette is one of a growing number of people — especially women — whose careers have accelerated as they have approached what used to be considered retirement age.

Pettersen spent her mid-career years with Dow Corning. This 22-year stretch, through her 30s and 40s, allowed her to “progress gently, step by step, while maintaining a reasonable work/life balance” while raising four children. The 50s saw a big change. First, she was head-hunted to join Dutch DSM, a global science-based company, one of the few women on their executive team. A few years later, she joined a start-up called BioAmber, producing chemical intermediates using sugars instead of fossil fuels. It was a meaningful shift, allowing her to push for more sustainable alternatives to petrochemicals. “It’s almost as though I had lived my career back to front,” she laughs, “with all the change and start-up experience at the end rather than the beginning.”

But the “traditional” career path may just be a “traditionally male” career path. Most companies focus on thirty-somethings as high-potential talent to be developed and accelerated with job mobility and stretch assignments — acting as if careers are made (or not) before the age of 40. But this approach has never served women (or parents) particularly well. As lives stretch out towards the 100-year mark (see the upcoming book on *The 100-year Life* by Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott), 50 may have to be redefined as simply a career mid-point.

Some companies are recognizing that a more gender-balanced talent pool requires a rethink of career phases, and are extending the age of talent identification from the 20s through the 40s.

At Unilever, Leena Nair, now Group HR, started a program earlier in her career in India called Career By Choice. It allowed employees — especially young parents — to become internal consultants for a time by offering flexible schedules. “Managing career cycles with flexibility and non-linear trajectories is important for us. It allows our employees to continue growing and developing while balancing personal priorities that become relevant at different life stages. We find the option of flexibility is particularly popular with women raising families, who then accelerate their career paths at a later stage.”

Odile de Damas-Nottin was appointed Senior VP HR of oil group Total’s Marketing & Services division at age 52 and promoted to the TOTAL Group’s Executive Team (32 people) at 54. She looks back on her career and acknowledges that this pattern was very much her own. First, there was a fast-tracked, highly varied learning curve on the commercial side of the business in her twenties. This was followed by an eight-year “plateau” in her thirties, running training for the French operation, when she had her three children. She remembers turning down an offer to go to the career-boosting internal leadership program just before having her third child. “It wouldn’t have been the right time,” she said, and acknowledges the extremely supportive managers she reported into at the time. They responded well when, a couple of years later, at age 38, she came back and asked to be sent on the exclusive program. This propelled her into a re-accelerated career phase. Now, at age 56, she is part of the top leadership team of one of the world’s big oil giants and is looking forward to continuing into broader leadership roles in the next, very challenging, decade of the Group’s future. Her appetite for leadership has only grown, and she looks with pleasure into her sixties at extending her experience to Boards of other companies as well.

For both women and men, it’s not just our professional life that peaks in our fifties. After the stress of the mid-life years, the data shows that happiness levels rise in the early 50s. New mental skills emerge.

“Older people have fewer rows and come up with better solutions to conflict,” noted the Economist in 2010, reviewing the research. “They are better at controlling their emotions, better at accepting misfortune and less prone to anger.”

Instead of feeling old and tired, fiftysomethings have figured out how to play the game, and can focus on influencing the outcome. While many still assume that careers are more or less over by the time you pass 50, the Boomer cohort is rewriting the rules. The combination of empty nests, established reputations, and paid-off real estate, means that the silver decades offer an unexpected cocktail of reduced costs, more flexibility, and – for some – exciting new career opportunities. This can all come as a delightful surprise. “Things get easier,” says Pettersen. “You have more time to think, more flexibility to move and more ambitions than ever before. I never expected this.”

However, there’s some evidence that suggest men and women may be on different trajectories during this decade. While the rates of both marriage and divorce have been steadily falling among the educated in the US for a couple of decades, both have been shooting up among the post-50s cohort. Women are the drivers here; two-thirds of people leaving decades-long marriages are women. As they hit their career peaks, they are looking for supportive partners – or no partner – that will allow them to flex their full potential. The men these women married often had classic, linear careers and are very ready to slow down... just as their wives’ careers take off. “[The husbands] are exhausted, having given their all for decades. They just want to play golf,” is how one executive described it to me.

But why does everyone need to follow the same career path anyway? Wouldn’t it make good sense for partners who have children to have complementary career cycles? Smart young couples will want to plan more holistic, dual career families, rather than individual ones, where each partner could have a slightly different, but mutually supportive, pacing. One partner could run the 30-to-50 sprint, the other a longer marathon.

Women (and a few pioneering men) who took a momentary career plateau in their 30s to be parents often thought they were harming their prospects. But if they re-accelerated in their 40s, and found companies willing to keep them on a career track, they find that they are now being offered prime career opportunities in their 50s and later. There is nothing new here. Felice Schwartz argued for flexibility back in 1989, and Anne-Marie Slaughter has updated the argument for this century. It’s just that the numbers and pressure keep growing as women become a majority of the educated workforce – and men push to be more involved parents.

Women have traditionally been the primary parent, although this is changing as countries and companies begin to replace maternity leave with the more gender balanced parental leave, allowing parents to sort out their own care and career choices. In the meantime, an ever-growing wave of highly educated and highly skilled women are re-emerging the other side of the family crunch, more ambitious than ever. Some companies are becoming flexible enough to enable their (relatively) late blooming, tapping into a potent new force in global business. For these smart, innovative employers, the silver decades may yield gold.