

# The Reemployment Process of Older Managers after a Plant Closing. Towards a Career Transition Framework

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose.** To inquire into a reemployment process of older managers in a setting of organizational restructuring, a context in which the dominant answer of organizations consists of stimulating early retirement.

**Methodology.** Fourteen reemployed older managers, and the HR manager in a career counseling role, were interviewed to learn about the quality of the reemployment process during a plant closing. Barriers and facilitators of reemployment, counseling behaviors of HR and significant contextual factors were identified. Data were analyzed using a combination of theory- and data-driven methodology. A theoretical framework was extended to offer more insight into reemployment processes.

**Findings.** Experiences of job content continuity and relational continuity facilitated the reemployment process. The embeddedness in an organizational culture and the experience of dualities strongly influenced how the reemployment process was experienced.

**Practical implications.** Counseling efforts should focus on finding job content continuity and relational continuity to smooth the reemployment process. HR/career counselors have to guard against the development of too strong and inflexible social identities during careers that hinder career transitions. Diverse forms of job mobility can be stimulated during the whole career. HR/career practitioners should develop the capacity to identify tensions between different 'logics' and handle these tensions constructively by setting up sound dialogues between the parties involved in a reemployment process.

**Originality/value.** Little research has been conducted on reemployment processes of older managers during restructuring. The research offers new insights into the dynamics of reemployment processes, and offers research and practice implications for researchers and practitioners.

**Keywords:** aging workforce, reemployment process, restructuring, career counseling, human resources, transition management

## INTRODUCTION

From both a research and practice perspective the retention and development of older workers will become a very important issue in decades to come (Walker, 1999; Brewington & Nassar-McMillan, 2000; Jepsen, Foden & Hutsebaut, 2002; Collins, 2003; Dychtwald, Erickson & Morison, 2004; Kirk & Belovics, 2005; Armstrong-Stassen & Templer, 2005, 2006; Burke & Ng, 2006; Baruch & Quick, 2007). The convergence of lowered fertility and improved health and longevity has generated growing numbers and proportions of older population throughout most of the world (Kinsella & Velkoff, 2001). Data from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that between 2005 and 2025 the number of Americans age 25-54 will grow from about 126 million to almost 131 million. At the same time, the number of people age 55 and older will grow at a much faster rate, from about 67 million to nearly 105 million (Purcell, 2005). This growth is for the most part attributed to the aging of the baby boom generation, people born between 1946 and 1964, which begins reaching the normal retirement ages during this decade (Collins, 2003; Dychtwald, Erickson & Morison, 2004).

Combined with labor force participation rates beginning to fall after age 55 (Collins, 2003; Purcell, 2005), and actual retirement ages that are often lower than statutory retirement ages in most industrialized countries (Kinsella & Velkoff, 2001), several researchers expect a worker shortage (e.g., Walker, 1999; Jepsen, Foden & Hutsebaut, 2002; Dychtwald, Erickson & Morison, 2004; Kirk & Belovics, 2005; Armstrong-Stassen & Templer, 2006; Burke & Ng, 2006): there will not be enough younger workers (1) to replace retiring baby boomers and (2) to pay for the pensions of the retiring baby boomers when life longevity continues to expand. The replacement problem is expected to be severe and chronic by nature due to persistent low birth rates since the late 1970s (Kinsella & Velkoff, 2001; Collins, 2003), leading to "a decline in the size of successive birth cohorts and a corresponding increase in the proportion of older relative to younger population" (Kinsella & Velkoff, 2001, p. 12), particularly in Western Europe where the birth-rate is well below the population replacement level of 2.1 (e.g., Kinsella & Velkoff, 2001; Dychtwald, Erickson & Morison, 2004). Indeed, the problem is not unique to the US; it is common to most Western and developed countries.

Organizations will be confronted with loss of skills, know-how and know-why, as older workers leave the organization prematurely. Academics around the world agree that the preferential solution for the expected worker shortages and loss of valuable knowledge is the retention and development of baby boomers in the workforce (e.g., Jepsen, Foden & Hutsebaut, 2002; Collins, 2003; Armstrong-Stassen & Templer, 2005, 2006; Burke & Ng, 2006).

Also, ways of aging are changing (Walker, 1999; Gergen & Gergen, 2002). A growing number of baby boomers want to continue working, for social as well as economic reasons (Collins, 2003; Dychtwald, Erickson & Morison, 2004). They do not feel themselves to be in a decline, degeneration or disengagement phase of life (e.g., as theorized by Cummings & Henry, 1961) but in a period full of potential growth and development (Gergen & Gergen, 2002; Collins, 2003).

HR and career researchers have given attention to the retention and development of older workers. Studies have focused on adapting training to the needs of older workers (Armstrong-Stassen & Templer, 2005), stimulating bridge jobs (i.e., transitional work between career employment and retirement) redefining retirement (Ulrich & Brott, 2005), changing the concept of retirement towards prolonged working (Collins, 2003; Dychtwald, Erickson & Morison, 2004), identifying criteria for successful aging in the workplace (Robson, 2006), the need for counseling older workers in developing vocational scripts (i.e., adaptive views of the self at work that enhance personal perceptions of productivity and agency) stimulating continuity of careers (Simon & Osipow, 1996), counseling needs of retirees who want to explore career choices postretirement (Harper & Shoffner, 2004), career counseling interventions for older adults including congruency-based and developmentally based interventions and interventions based on career stages, retraining, and workplace adjustment (Brewington & Nassar-McMillan, 2000), mismanagement and self-defeating behavior concerning development of workers over age 50 (Greller & Stroh, 2004).

After reviewing relevant literature, two observations stand out. Firstly, despite some research attention, several authors have observed a dearth of literature concerning career development of an increasingly aging workforce (e.g., Whiston & Brecheisen, 2002; Guindon & Richmond, 2005). Secondly, notwithstanding overwhelming evidence of workforce aging and associated challenges, many organizations continue to encourage older employees to leave prematurely by means of early retirement incentives (Dychtwald, Erickson & Morison, 2004; Armstrong-Stassen & Templer, 2006). This phenomenon is associated with “long-standing human resource practices” that “invest heavily in youth and push out older workers” (Dychtwald, Erickson & Morison, 2004, p. 49) instead of creating a culture that retains and develops older workers by honoring experience and offering flexible work arrangements. Since the 1970s many Western countries have a persistent tradition of collective early retirement during turbulent restructuring, with very attractive financial conditions, encouraging if not mandating older workers to leave organizations prematurely, often in the name of giving opportunities to younger workers. Early retirement was co-created by government, employers, HR and unions (Martens, Lambrechts, Manshoven & Vandenberk, 2006). Particularly in Western Europe, employers and HR have used early retirement mainly as a cost-cutting and efficiency operation, bargaining of unions has focused on maximizing collective financial conditions for early retirement and government has emphasized early retirement as elegant solution for youth unemployment (Rocco & Thijssen, 2006; Martens et al., 2006). In the U.S. collective bargaining of unions does not focus on collective financial conditions for early retirement but “employers find ways to dismiss older employees regardless of employees’ desire to remain” (Rocco & Thijssen, 2006, p. 4).

Older workers, managers and the more educated have experienced the highest job loss rates from organizational restructuring (e.g., Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998; Turnley & Feldman, 1999) in the last two decades (Sullivan, 1999). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006), between January 2003 and December 2005, about 863.000 older workers (55 to 65 years and over) left or lost a job held for 3+ years. The main reasons for displacement reported were plant or company closings or moves. During organizational restructuring, older individuals are especially vulnerable to job loss (Brewington & Nassar-McMillan, 2000). Reemployment of older workers is difficult due to age discrimination and negative stereotypes about productivity, flexibility and trainability (e.g., Wolf, London, Casey & Pufahl, 1995; Hanisch, 1999), often leading to emotional and financial distress (Brewington & Nassar-McMillan, 2000). Moreover, restructurings have been associated with managers’ strong negative reactions to psychological contract violations (Turnley & Feldman, 1999), and it is suggested by Sullivan (1999) that “older individuals, perhaps more accustomed to traditional employment relationships, may experience more negative outcomes (e.g., job and life dissatisfaction) if forced into a less traditional employment relationship” (p. 472).

Reemployment studies of older workers are scarce, especially in restructuring settings, and quality of reemployment has been largely neglected as a research issue (Hannish, 1999). A small number of studies in survivor literature have inquired into in-company reemployment (or job transfers) during organizational restructuring (e.g., Armstrong-Stassen, 2003; Amundson, Borgen, Jordan & Erlebach, 2004), although it has not been investigated in the context of an aging work force. Amundson et al. (2004) found that when survivors understood the reasons for restructuring, and were allowed input into the process, they were reassured. Transitions to a new job were facilitated when leaders took on counseling roles of providing support and direction through open, honest and clear communication (e.g., Amundson et al., 2004).

In reviewing several studies about the role of work environment in career transition issues, Flores et al. (2003) emphasized the importance of creating a supportive work environment, or organizational culture (Schein, 2006), that is conducive to employees' career development. In addition, Flores et al. (2003) concluded that smooth career transitions are strongly associated with employees' feelings of involvement, voice and impact on the environment to which they are adapting.

Tang (2003), describing the major strength of career development practice as "helping individuals adapt to changing environments" (p. 61), also emphasized a major weakness of career studies: most studies do not take into account contextual factors that may influence career transition practices studied. In organizational change literature, Pettigrew (2000) made a similar observation stating that most change research is a-contextual, i.e., ignoring the embeddedness of change processes in a particular organizational culture and environment.

Given an aging workforce, policy makers and organizations are faced with reversing the policies and practices of earlier decades. But few organizations are currently enacting innovation processes that disrupt the detrimental status quo (e.g. Walker, 1999; Dychtwald, Erickson & Morison, 2004; Armstrong-Stassen & Templer, 2006).

The purpose of the present study is to inquire into such an innovation effort, notably a reemployment process of older workers in a setting of organizational restructuring (plant closing), a context in which the dominant answer consisted of stimulating early retirement. We studied barriers and facilitators of the reemployment process, counseling behaviors of HR and contextual factors in terms of organizational culture that influenced the transition process.

## METHODOLOGY

The qualitative case study as research strategy was chosen for several reasons. First, the qualitative case study (e.g., Yin, 2003) offers "an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation" (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). Second, the case study approach has a revelatory character (Stake, 2000): there is room for unforeseen discoveries from data. Third, case study research offers the opportunity to develop theory (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1971; Eisenhard, 1989) in response to our research question, "How do participants perceive the quality of reemployment process during a plant closing in terms of (1) barriers and facilitators to reemployment, (2) counseling behaviors of HR and (3) significant contextual factors?"

## RESEARCH SITE

UME was the autonomous engineering branch of the Belgian international materials group Umicore. Umicore has industrial operations on several continents. It currently employs some 14,000 people. Umicore has eight sites in Belgium. Since early nineties the engineering activities of Umicore were carried out by the UME site. UME performed internal and external projects. Mid September 2003 the closure of UME was announced. External projects were stopped to avoid too much critical knowledge transfer to third parties and internal projects had declined considerably. As a consequence, the decision was made to integrate latter projects in business units of Umicore.

The entire UME work force, i.e., 76 people, was affected by the restructuring. 42 "older" managers (75% was older than 55) were reemployed within other Belgian Umicore sites: they went directly to a new job at a different site without a period of not having a job. Between mid September and the end of December 2003 the HR manager of Umicore Belgium facilitated their reemployment process. In this period the HR manager took on a career counseling role and carried out a series of individual conversations to ease their transition to a new job in a new setting. He was on site 2 days a week. Eight managers chose for reemployment at another company through outplacement. In agreement with unions, blue collar workers who could not be transferred internally were laid off and found a job in another company.

## RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

At the start of 2004 the HR manager was invited to explore mutual research opportunities regarding organizational challenges associated with an aging workforce. In March 2004 the authors conducted a first explorative interview with the HR manager at Umicore headquarters (Brussels, Belgium). The focus of this interview was on 'innovative organizational practices that stimulate older workers to remain in the workforce instead of encouraging them to leave prematurely through early retirement plans'. The HR manager underlined the importance of the topic and referred to the reemployment process of older managers in UME as a 'best practice'. We all agreed that inquiry into this process would be interesting. Various ways to collect data were explored (questionnaires, focus groups, document analysis, interviews). Because of the complexity of the reemployment process, its recentness and emotionality, and the desire to give potential research participants maximum voice, individual in-depth interviews were opted for.

Mid May 2004 the authors met with the HR manager Belgium. The research focus, type of interviews, possible interview questions, expected results, feedback of results to HR and framing of the research were discussed. In June 2004 16 reemployed ex-UME managers older than 57 were invited to take part in the research. We chose those older than 57 because 57 was the age at which in the past early retirement was stimulated (versus reemployment now). The managers received an invitation letter from the authors and the HR manager. In this letter the research was framed as a follow-up of their recent career move, especially in order to learn lessons on Umicore's career management of "older" managers. The authors were briefly introduced as interested researchers that would contact them to schedule an interview in their mother tongue (Dutch or French) on the location where they were working. It was stressed that research participation would be appreciated but was not obligatory. In order to give potential research participants a sense of the interview content four broad questions were included in the letter: (1) how did you experience the job transition process, (2) how do you experience your present job, (3) has this move influenced your view on job rotation and (4) do you judge that extra measures are needed to improve the transition phase? The letter also mentioned that results of interviews would be grouped and delivered to Umicore HR without focusing on individual statements (guaranteeing anonymity). The opportunity was also given to contact a member of the HR Belgium staff if they would like to discuss a personal topic. A week after the letter was sent the authors contacted the potential research participants by phone. Fourteen out of sixteen reemployed managers agreed to participate in the research. One manager didn't want to be interviewed for personal reasons. Another manager was abroad on assignment.

From July till August 2004 15 interviews took place: 14 interviews with the reemployed managers on various Umicore sites and one additional interview with the HR manager Belgium who played an important career counseling role during the transition process. Interviews lasted between 1,5 and 2,5 hours. The age of participating reemployed managers varied between 57 and 64. The interviews can be characterized as narrative interviews (Hosking, 2004). These interviews are relatively unstructured compared to, for example, questionnaires. The interviewer leaves space for participants to tell their story in relation to some broad question(s)/theme(s). Consequently a limited interview protocol is used (e.g., Yin, 2003). Part of the researcher's intention is to get "out of the way, so to speak, of what the other person wants to say, and to encourage a conversation of equals" (Hosking, 2004, p. 271). Narrative interviewers also try to be as explicit as possible regarding their own research narratives such as why they are asking questions and who may do what with the interview results. The 15 interviews in the UME case more or less followed the interview protocol of (1) contacting, situating the research, telling the research story as developed up to this point, making mutual expectations concerning the interview and interview results clear, (2) asking questions about experiences and emotions during the reemployment process from the announcement of the UME closure up to and including doing a new job, with particular attention to barriers and facilitators of reemployment process ("hindering experiences", "helping experiences"), (4) evaluating the interview ("how did you experience the interview", "did you experience enough safety to speak freely", "any questions"). This interview protocol provided sufficient structure and allowed enough flexibility for participants to tell their stories (e.g., Hosking, 2004). The interviews were held in a relaxed and informal atmosphere. This atmosphere might help participants to recount their reemployment stories with less restraint. The interviews are seen as reflective practices that can help participants to make sense of and to learn from their transition experiences in order to cope better with potential future transitions. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy of data and to make data analyses by various researchers possible.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The process of data analysis used in this research is a combination of theory driven and data driven analysis (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 1999). Data analysis is *theory driven* in that it was inspired by a focused literature review. A transition framework was used as theoretical "sensemaking strategy" (Langley, 1999, p.

694) to understand the process of reemployment (see below). The literature review combined with the theoretical framework acted as a research metaphor. However, metaphors play a rather paradoxical role: they are vital to understanding and highlighting certain aspects of processes, while at the same time they restrict understanding by back grounding other aspects (Morgan, 1997). Hence the combination with *data driven* analysis in the research.

Using NVivo software for qualitative data analysis the interview data were coded and analyzed through the “constant comparative” method allowing tentative theory building from data (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1971; Charmaz, 2000). The type of theory that is build is ‘generative theory’, i.e., theory that generates actions and opportunities beyond merely explaining and predicting (Bouwen, 2003, p. 21). This kind of theory building is mainly intended to open the conversation concerning (the management of) reemployment processes and challenges of older managers in a setting of organizational restructuring.

Each transcript was coded through open and in vivo coding. Participant’s exact words and phrases were coded if they were related to (1) the perceived quality of the reemployment process in terms of barriers and facilitators, (2) the counseling role/behaviors of the HR manager and (3) contextual factors that influenced the reemployment process. As each participant’s responses revolved around similar themes, codes were grouped under similar headings. Each successive coding step attempted to identify significant themes and patterns suggesting connections between themes identified. A first working analysis of the interview data was discussed in two research group meetings. This resulted in more clear themes and patterns across the data.

The authors integrated the categories of the theoretical framework with the identified themes and patterns that emerged from data into an organized whole, thereby developing the framework in order to better understand career transitions, a process that is similar to what Polkinghorne (1995) called “narrative configuration” (p. 5). This resulted in a preliminary research report. This report was discussed with the HR manager Belgium and a colleague of Industrial Relations. They took on the role of critical inquirer which forced us to be as clear as possible regarding the findings and the theoretical interpretations. Additional insights were developed. In December 2004 the final research report was delivered to Umicore HR. The findings would be used to develop Umicore’s career management of older managers. In June 2006 we gave an extensive feedback session to HR Corporate concerning findings and implications for career development at Umicore. The goal of the feedback session was to start a company-wide dialogue about the importance of career transition management and to get support for this initiative from corporate HR. They gave their support and formulated several possibilities for action. Table 1 summarizes the chronological order of events.

Table 1  
*Chronological order of events*

<b>Time period</b>	<b>Event</b>
Mid September 2003	The closure of UME was announced
Mid September-End December 2003	The HR manager conducted a series of career counseling conversations with to be reemployed UME managers
March 2004	Explorative interview with the HR manager
Mid May 2004	Interview with the HR manager
June 2004	The HR manager invited potential research participants by letter
July-August 2004	14 interviews were conducted with reemployed managers Interview conducted with the HR manager
August-November 2004	Interview data were analyzed, the preliminary research report was written and discussed with the HR manager and his colleague
December 2004	The final research report was delivered to Umicore HR
June 2006	A feedback session was given to HR Corporate

### **QUALITY OF THE RESEARCH**

To guarantee the soundness of the research process several techniques were used (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Credibility was improved by (1) being explicit about the research setting, participants, theoretical framework and research method, (2) audio recording and transcribing interview data, (3) researcher triangulation on the level of data analysis (independent analysis of interview transcripts, discussing analysis and conclusions repeatedly, research team meetings) and (4) participant triangulation by dialoguing with different perspectives in order to obtain a more holistic understanding of the reemployment process studied (HR manager Belgium, HR Industrial Relations, 14 reemployed managers, feedback session with HR Corporate). Also, participants convinced the authors that they spoke openly and honestly about the topic at hand. Transferability

was guarded by (1) being explicit about the theoretical transition framework as sensemaking device and (2) clarifying the way in which findings were arrived at. Dependability and conformability were improved by the use of the software package NVivo. Interview data and analysis procedures were stored enabling potential auditing and reanalysis by other researchers.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

A theoretical framework is presented to understand the reemployment process of older managers in the UME case. In the discussion section, this framework will be developed to better understand and manage career transitions, in particular reemployment processes in a restructuring setting, by focusing on how the meanings of the findings extend the framework. The framework was originally developed by Bouwen and Fry (1988) to understand transition processes from old to new in a setting of organizational change and innovation. Within this framework, three behavioral aspects are central: how continuity of purpose and worth is provided and maintained; how novelty is introduced and transformed into ideas for action; and how transition from old to new is actually done. Balancing of these three core aspects creates a constant tension between a dominant logic and a new logic.

### **MANAGING CONTINUITY**

In situations of innovation actors experience a disruption of 'things as usual'. This disruption stems from the fact that the continuity with the past and with previous activities is threatened. Managing continuity means to initiate a appreciative conversational process in which all the parties involved converse about what it is that currently sustains the organization's ability to function and what it is that provides the organizational members a sense of identity and ongoingness so that they feel safe enough to risk changes (Bouwen & Fry, 1988). Acknowledging what is and appreciating the past of an organization is a condition to make it possible that this same essence of the organization can be questioned. Not paying attention to what is already there can be considered as the main source for resistance to change. Paying attention to what is creates an experience of continuity, safety, trust and energy to co-author a transition effort. Bouwen and Fry (1988) emphasize, "it is the asking of the question and discussion of answers among key members of the enterprise that we believe is crucial" (p. 160).

### **MANAGING INNOVATION**

The goal of managing innovation is to facilitate a process in which all parties involved surface ideas, expectations and intentions and come to shared actions. This can be achieved by creating conditions wherein "people experience that their beliefs and passions can be melded with organizational practices and goals" (Bouwen & Fry, 1988, p. 164). In the beginning of a project, it is necessary to invest enough space, time and energy in search activities towards common ground: active searching and considering a diversity of ideas/visions before shifting to action. At a given moment in time actors should make a converging movement: getting priorities straight and taking decisions so that people feel progression towards a goal. The presence of one or more 'idea champions' is also important: they express a high level of energy and involvement, and initiate an appreciative and future-oriented discourse.

### **MANAGING TRANSITION**

Attention to transition means understanding how the organization moves from one state to another, often unknown, one. Being aware of one's own strengths and having an idea about where to go is not enough to bring about the future. The organization must also be able to actually move, change or transform in a clear and effective way, even when the final goal is still a moving target. Several concerns have to be taken into account when managing transition (Bouwen & Fry, 1988). First there is the need to balance planning and articulating. A plan has to give a direction and a sequence of tasks, this creates perspective on the future. Simultaneously, it has to be open enough to be altered during the process by people's experiences of the process. Second is the need to create 'shared meaning' or 'common script'. How does one make common sense from the experience of multiple realities of those involved, so that they can move towards collective action in a committed manner? This can be achieved through dialogue: not only information exchanges but also a mutual search towards new-shared understanding and commitment. Third there is the need that learning takes place: learning lessons for this and future transition processes.

## **RESULTS**

### **BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS OF THE REEMPLOYMENT PROCESS OF OLDER MANAGERS**

The reemployment process consisted of five broad phases: (a) precedents, (b) the closure of UME, (c) individual career counseling conversations with the HR manager, (d) offering a new job, and (e) a fresh start. Associated with a particular phase, various facilitators and barriers of the process emerged from data (Table 2).

Table 2  
*Facilitators and Barriers regarding the Process of Reemployment*

Facilitators	THE PROCESS OF REEMPLOYMENT	Barriers
	<b><i>PHASE 0: Precedents</i></b>	
		Financially favorable early retirement for two older managers Negotiations about early retirement
	<b><i>PHASE 1: The closure of UME</i></b>	
Job security elsewhere within the Umicore group		Anxiety and doubts
External reemployment		No early retirement option
Confidence in the situation, optimism		Unjustified closure
Opportunity to change		No appreciation of past efforts
	<b><i>PHASE 2: The individual career counseling conversations with the HR manager</i></b>	
Opportunity to clarify wishes and aspirations		Diversion maneuver
Willingness to take up a new job		Uncertainty about the purpose of conversations with HR
Appreciation and transfer of competencies to new job		Sudden and unclear reemployment procedure
Reemployment in stead of early retirement		Mental switch from layoff to new job is too large
Parallel career transition of HR manager resulting in empathy		Strong emotional connection with UME
Informal contact, high approachability of HR manager		Anxiety and doubts about new job Lack of psychological support
	<b><i>PHASE 3: Offering a new job</i></b>	
Perceived correspondence between old and new job		Experienced incongruence between old and new job
Quick reemployment procedure		Policy out of touch with tradition and people
New job congruent with expectations and aspirations		Feeling of injustice because of precedents before closure Unilateral approach concerning terms of employment Temporary contract No alternatives for labor reduction Limited career development opportunities
	<b><i>PHASE 4: Starting a new job in a new setting</i></b>	
Satisfaction with the new job and work environment		Different atmosphere on the work floor between colleagues
Lowered work pressure		No congruence between the two jobs
'Decent' retirement in prospect		Less commitment to the job
Eagerness to keep on learning		Less responsibility and autonomy, feeling of demotion Not enough counseling support in the new job from HR

**PRECEDENTS.** Two precedents of the UME closure were identified as barriers of the reemployment process. Six months before the closure two colleague older managers were encouraged to leave UME by means of financially attractive early retirement packages. Remaining colleagues expected the same package in the future. Four other colleague managers were in the middle of early retirement negotiations when the closure was announced. These negotiations were ceased: "early retirement wasn't an option anymore, in-company reemployment was". The HR manager called these precedents "unfortunate because these events created expectations for attractive early retirement packages, expectations that could not be met any longer; management of these exceptions was challenging".

**THE CLOSURE OF UME.** Facilitators of the reemployment process were all related to reduction of emotional distress associated with closure. Some managers that co-founded UME were reassured job security within Umicore in writing several years ago. Other managers had confidence in the situation and their capacity to handle it, saw reemployment as an opportunity to change, and were confident to find a new job, if necessary, outside Umicore. Managers who worked mainly on external projects at locations other than UME, in countries around the world, found it easier to distance themselves from the closure because "our social network was more distributed, our emotional connection was not confined to UME". However, barriers of the reemployment process often dominated the experiences of managers; doubts and emotional distress were prevalent feelings. The closure and ending of the early retirement option were felt as "unjustified". Most managers experienced "a

lack of appreciation concerning qualities and past efforts, and accomplishments”. The disruption was experienced as too dramatic, leading to feelings of discontinuity.

#### **INDIVIDUAL CAREER COUNSELING CONVERSATIONS WITH THE HR MANAGER.**

Several facilitators of the reemployment process were identified. Most managers appreciated the career counseling conversations with the HR manager because these offered “the possibility to explore and clarify wishes, aspirations, worries and new job conditions reciprocally”. HR listened to managers’ stories which gave “a feeling of involvement and appreciation”. A number of managers indicated that their capabilities were recognized in the search for a new job. High approachability of the HR manager, and his informal contacting (e.g., in corridors, the mess), were also highly praised by most managers. The primary goal of the conversations was perceived by the HR manager as “to make contact, build trust and emphasize the policy choice of maximum reemployment”. Managers simultaneously experienced several barriers of the reemployment process. The counseling conversations were framed as a diversion maneuver by a few managers: “the decisions had already been made, our involvement was pretence”. The purpose of the conversation was not transparent enough and several managers found the openness of communicating by the HR manager “suspicious...maybe because we weren’t used to this openness”. The conversations were also experienced as places for expression of grief but a number of managers felt that adequate psychological support was lacking at the time, expressed as “human resources were not humane after all”. Particularly managers with a strong emotional connection to UME, mainly managers that worked within the local UME social network for years, experienced difficulty in reframing attractive images of “life long steady employment, followed by (early) retirement” towards a reemployment future. Several managers felt uncomfortable with ‘empty’ job descriptions and found the reemployment procedure “sudden” and “unclear”. An overall experience of the managers was that there wasn’t enough time invested into the process: “providing appropriate relocations for fifty managers during a three month span was simply not realistic”.

**OFFERING A NEW JOB.** An important facilitator of the reemployment process was the perceived congruence between the old and the new job, and the recognition of expectations and aspirations in the new job proposal, as discussed in earlier career counseling conversations. The relatively short period between the individual counseling conversations and the new job proposal was much appreciated by almost all managers, ending a period of job uncertainty. In addition, some managers had already experiences with their new boss and colleagues from previous assignments at the new location, which was experienced as something to “hold on to”. Barriers were strongly related to experienced incongruence between the old job, and expectations and aspirations espoused during career counseling conversations, and the new job offered. Many managers had the feeling that the new organizational policy of reemployment was “out of touch with tradition of life long steady employment and early retirement, something unheard of”, “out of the blue, developed without consulting us” and “injustice” (often referring to the precedents before the closure). Several managers were disappointed with some aspects of the new job offer: “terms of employment were not really negotiable, e.g., the nature of the new employment contract was temporary, not life-long; flexible alternatives like part-time work were lacking and career development opportunities were limited”.

**STARTING A NEW JOB IN A NEW SETTING.** Facilitators included satisfaction with the new job content and the new work environment, especially the support of new leaders and colleagues was mentioned repeatedly as a very important facilitator: “after a couple of weeks I had the feeling that I had been working in the new place for years, I felt supported by my new colleagues and boss, and my work was very challenging”. Lowered work pressure and opportunities to keep on learning were also experienced as beneficial to the reemployment experience. In this phase, several managers perceived the new job as a better alternative to early retirement, also because of financial reasons. Other managers emphasized barriers that included feelings of demotion associated with less challenging new jobs and work environments, and a feeling of senselessness: “idle away time in the waiting room of retirement with a high salary disproportionate to the expected output”. Some managers continued to experience a lack of congruence between the old and the new job, and especially between the old and the new work environment: “now, there is a different atmosphere among colleagues, impersonal and stiff, I don’t feel at home”. A somewhat surprising result was the new job and work environment experience of managers that previously worked on external projects, managers that experienced the closure as less threatening because they “were used to switch from project to project, to meet other people, work with them for a while, and work rather independently from UME” (see phase 1). However, a lot of these same managers, who were used to a lot of flexibility in their careers, felt in this phase that:

In the past we were ‘builders of cathedrals’ with a lot of autonomy and responsibility:  
we went from China to Chili to set up new factories. That was easier than the switch to this new job within the company: a function with less autonomy and more dependency on the experience of others;  
a demotion.



Several managers also expressed the need for additional career counseling in this new job and work environment.

### **THE EMBEDDEDNESS OF THE REEMPLOYMENT PROCESS IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**

Several managers pointed out that their experiences of the reemployment process were strongly influenced by the organizational culture of UME, and that of the larger Umicore group. A manager expressed this as:

You've worked for a long time within this place. It has become your mother. You just wouldn't say after all these years: "that other place is now (going to become) my mother". It's a mother's duty to take care of her children. They had to take care of us.

Another manager stated that:

We're not used to change: you went into a particular job in-depth, and stayed there. If it suited you well, you didn't want to change, and you didn't have to, you had a lot of autonomy. You were somebody in your work and felt secure, comfortable.

The HR manager confirmed that the organization had constructed a strong culture of stability and comfort, and emphasized that "Umicore had no history of stimulating career changes, certainly not within UME, therefore this reemployment initiative was experienced as a real culture breakthrough towards more career mobility". Certainly in a restructuring setting, with early retirement of older workers as the norm, "reemployment was experienced as a major disruption of things as usual, a real innovation".

### **THE EXPERIENCE OF DUALITIES**

An unexpected finding was that during the reemployment process, participants experienced various tensions between different logics. These tensions between logics are described in terms of three dualities.

The first duality is the 'career development logic' and the 'economic logic of restructuring'. The HR manager and several older managers articulated that "the career development logic is often espoused by employers, HR, career counselors, labor unions and employees: by developing our employees we develop our organization and vice versa. The two are inseparable". This logic emphasizes that employees are assets to be developed. Labor unions and employees agree. However, the HR manager contemplated that "unions and workers mainly perceive recurring restructuring every two years, interpreting the restructuring events as an 'economic efficiency' logic from management" that dominates the career development logic: employees are costs to be cut.

The second duality is the 'involvement logic' and the 'legislative logic'. The HR manager expressed his "desire to communicate transparently and involve employees in an early stage of the reemployment process, or even prior to this process". However, the Belgian legislative procedure associated with restructuring efforts dominated. In the wake of the Renault Vilvoorde affair, Belgium adopted a law, the "Renault law" (1998), laying down penalties in case of non-respect of mandatory formal steps for the announcement of collective redundancies. The HR manager stressed:

Legislative logic hindered early informal involvement and communication because formal procedures had to be followed strictly: the first announcement of closure, and the intention of reemployment, had to be made at the Works Council according to the Renault law.

This made early informal involvement of unions and older managers impossible, "leading to a shock effect", a situation much regretted by the HR manager.

The third duality identified is the 'stimulating change throughout the career logic' and the 'change as negative stress logic'. The HR manager emphasized that "HR wants to stimulate career changes and coach people how to cope with transitions and discomfort to develop resilience". Today though, "unions and employees associate these changes mainly with 'negative stress' and try to avoid change as much as possible". Older managers and the HR manager often attributed the latter to change averse aspects of the organizational culture as discussed above.

### **TOWARDS A CAREER TRANSITION FRAMEWORK: DISCUSSION**

The meanings of the findings are discussed for the framework, and for future research and practice. Limitations of the study are discussed. The findings have indicated that individuals try to make sense of transitions in their lives by connecting the past and the future into a 'narrative unity' (MacIntyre, 1981). They situate the process of reemployment within their professional life narrative by trying to rediscover a certain extent of coherence and continuity between the old and the new job. The experience and the management of

continuity seemed to be crucial for our research participants to experience and to enact the transition process more positively. This finding is consistent with the proposed framework (Bouwen & Fry, 1988) and with literature that underlined the importance of congruency-based interventions in counseling older workers (e.g., Brewington & Nassar-McMillan, 2000).

As was indicated in our results, the experience of continuity seemed to be a complex, multi-level experience. To understand this experience, we need to extend the proposed framework with new concepts. Two distinguishable levels of experience of continuity are interwoven in the reemployment process: continuity on the job content level and continuity on the relational level.

The experience of *job content continuity* deals with the extent to which individuals experience sufficient similarity between the old and the new job content. Experienced differences in job content continuity can be both horizontal and vertical. *Horizontal* means the extent to which people have to develop and internalize new competencies in the new job. *Vertical* means the extent to which people's responsibility and autonomy increases or decreases in the new job. Our results showed that too large leaps to other competencies (horizontal discontinuity), and loss of self-determination and responsibility (vertical discontinuity), undermined the participants' professional self-image and feeling of worth. Especially the shifting experiences and emotions of older managers, who before the closure worked on external projects, were indicative. Although they seemed to be better in handling the initial phases of the reemployment process, they experienced feelings of demotion in the new job associated with decreased autonomy and responsibility, and increased dependency on others. Certainly, setting up factories around the world demanded specific competencies; however, each new project demanded more of the same competencies. A new job, on the other hand, often entails not only horizontal but also vertical reorientation.

The experience of *relational continuity* deals with the extent to which individuals experience sufficient overlap between the old and the new relational work environment. Our results indicated that individuals who didn't experience sufficient relational continuity experienced and enacted the transition process more negatively. On the other hand, when participants experienced sufficient relational overlap, they made their transition more constructively. The different experiences of research participants who worked in UME, and the participants who worked mainly on external projects, were indicative. Managers who worked in UME had constructed a much stronger UME social network as compared to their colleagues, who were only virtually depended on UME. UME offered a safe and known culture in which managers had the freedom to maximize competencies and to construct a strong social identity. However, when UME activities were stopped, the social network to which one belonged also crumbled down. Hence, for these managers, the reemployment process towards a new job meant a major and emotionally difficult reconstruction of their social identity. A strong well-defined social network, which demanded little adaptation, offered the opportunity to develop a strong but rather inflexible social identity that hindered the reemployment of these managers. On the other hand, managers who worked on location were obliged to adapt more frequently, and constructed a less pronounced, but more flexible social identity that facilitated their reemployment process. Social identity is defined here as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). It seems that participants who participated in multiple communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), and hence were trained in adapting to new circumstances, were better equipped to handle the reemployment process: their social identity was to a lesser extent linked to UME, their social network was to a lesser extent eroded and/or they had already relational anchor points in the new environment.

According to these findings, counseling efforts during a reemployment process of older managers should be focused on finding as much of job content continuity (horizontal as well as vertical) and relational continuity as possible to smooth the transition. HR and career practitioners also have to guard against the client's development of a too strong and inflexible social identity during his/her career that hinders future career transitions. To this end, HR/career counselors might frequently discuss and stimulate possibilities of job rotation, exchange programs between locations, professional networking, leaning groups, change workshops and/or training during the whole career.

Smooth career transitions are strongly associated with employees' feelings of involvement, voice and impact on the environment to which they are adapting (e.g., Flores et al., 2003). In a restructuring setting, career transitions to a new job are facilitated when leaders take on counseling roles of providing support and direction through open, honest and clear communication (e.g., Amundson et al., 2004). Our results certainly underlined the importance of supporting counseling behavior of the HR manager such as listening, recognizing and appreciating capabilities, empathizing, high approachability and informal contacting associated with

participants' trust and involvement in the process. Our research extends the understanding of these interaction or communication issues by focusing on the nature of the career counseling conversations held by the HR manager. As was indicated in the results, participants were simultaneously in search of (a) appreciation of developed competencies and past accomplishments, (b) understanding of their 'here-and-now' situation, (c) future possibilities. However, such search activities demand an investment of time and space (Bouwen & Fry, 1988), an investment which was felt by participants as too little, leading to negative sensemaking. Participants felt that a clear plan of the reemployment process was missing, and that the conversations were too much focused on finding a solution quickly, instead of taking time to understand and appreciate qualities, experiences and perspectives in order to work towards a common script for the future, the latter being a necessary element in the framework of Bouwen and Fry (1988) to manage transitions successfully. People need sufficient time and space when they are trying to rediscover a certain extent of job content and relational continuity between the old and the new environment.

The importance of creating a supportive work environment or organizational culture that is conducive to workers' career development is underlined by several authors (e.g., Flores et al., 2003; Schein, 2006). Our results supported the need for developing such a culture and showed that a change-averse organizational culture hindered research participants to experience and to enact the reemployment process more positively. Hence, the results of this study highlight the importance of studying the embeddedness of transition processes in a particular organizational culture and environment, as has been suggested by Hosking (2004), Tang (2003) and Ebberwein et al. (2004). Inquiry into the embeddedness of the process helps to explain experiences and emotions, and positive and negative sensemaking.

Our results also suggested that to understand reemployment processes after restructuring, in a context of an aging workforce, one has to take into account the experience of several dualities within a constant tension between a dominant logic (early retirement of older managers after a plant closing) and a new logic (reemployment of older managers after a plant closing). The dualities identified are associated with core questions for research and practice. 'The career development logic and the economic logic of restructuring'-duality raises the question on how to manage career development efforts constructively in a context of recurring cost-cutting restructuring initiatives. 'The involvement logic and the legislative logic'-duality raises the question on how to communicate transparently and use early involvement strategies by HR and career practitioners in a restructuring setting dominated by a legislative logic. 'The stimulating change throughout the career logic and the change as negative stress logic'-duality raises the question on how to make career changes attractive possibilities for all stakeholders involved, how to keep a sense of continuity in professional identity in a context of regular career change. Participants used these logics and dualities to enact the transition process they were immersed in. This finding raises questions on how to manage these dualities constructively. Hence, from a research perspective it would be interesting to inquire into the ways older managers, career counselors, unions, HR and employers manage these dualities interdependently. Research on the management of dualities (e.g., Janssens & Steyaert, 1999) might contribute to the development of this research stream. An important talent for the HR and career practitioner might be the capacity to identify tensions between different logics and facilitate these tensions constructively in a restructuring setting. This is a challenging task since "the experience of dualities and their management is likely to be highly context sensitive" (Pettigrew, 2000, p. 246). Hence, a step an HR and career practitioner might take is to facilitate a sound dialogue between all stakeholders involved in order to stimulate mutual understanding and appreciation rather than mutual attacking, blaming and/or complaining (e.g., Schein, 1996), in this way lighten the reemployment process.

Our research offers an interesting perspective on the dynamics and perceived quality of a reemployment process of older managers after a plant closing. However, our study has its limitations. The study is limited in scope: there were fifteen participants from two perspectives, i.e., older managers and HR. An improvement would be to also interview top management and labor unions. In this study these perspectives were only involved indirectly through the narratives of the managers and HR. The character of the study is explorative and retrospective. Real-time participant observation and interviewing would be desirable to have more triangulated data and methods. Moreover, to get a more profound understanding of experiences and perspectives, and particularly how these shift over time, it would be interesting to organize multiple interviews at different time periods or phases. However, this research task isn't obvious due to access problems in often very turbulent and emotional reemployment processes. Multiple in-depth case studies of reemployment processes would be valuable because cross-case comparisons might lead to deeper understanding. In this sense cross-cultural research might also be a recommended research venue.

The research presented here had the goal to open the research and practice conversation concerning (the management of) reemployment processes and challenges of older managers in a setting of organizational

restructuring, a setting in which the dominant answer of many organizations still consists in stimulating early retirement. Based on a variety of conversations with various stakeholders (CEO's, managers, HRM, career counselors, unions, older managers, government, researchers) we have reason to believe we succeeded in initiating an interesting and challenging discussion. We invite the BRQ readers to join the conversation and to co-develop generative knowledge about a topic that has not received the attention it deserves.

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