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## ‘Portfolio careers’ and the search for flexibility in later life

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### **ABSTRACT**

Economic activity rates among older men have declined rapidly in recent decades, presenting major challenges for individuals and society. One solution suggested to the problems of a lack of full-time permanent jobs for older men has been more flexible ways of working such as portfolio careers, freelancing and consulting for those nearing retirement age. But there has been a lack of research examining the realities of flexible working for the 50-plus age group. This article examines the experiences of older professionals as freelancers in the UK media industry where such working practices have long been common. By examining this relationship from the employer’s and older freelancer’s perspective, this article aims to discover the true extent of choice, freedom and autonomy experienced by portfolio professionals in late career.

### **KEY WORDS**

flexible employment/ freelancing / older workers / portfolio careers / retirement

## **Introduction**

**T**he rapid decline in economic activity rates among older men since the 1970s has been described as one of the most remarkable labour market transformations of modern times (Duncan, 2003: 101). Organizational restructuring, redundancy and early retirement policies are said to have forced older workers out of full-time permanent jobs. At the same time, authors have identified a lack of attractive, flexible options to allow older workers to remain in or return to paid employment. Management, career and policy writers have suggested that certain types of flexibility, such as portfolio working, freelancing

and consulting, offer promising alternatives to staff careers for people nearing retirement age.

Yet research which examines the realities of flexible working for the 50-plus age group has been surprisingly lacking. Despite national and international concern over ageing populations, growing economic dependency ratios and rising pension deficits, studies have tended to neglect the role of flexible jobs in extending working lives. The research reported here examines the experiences of older professionals as portfolio workers, also known as freelancers, operating in one sector where such working is common: the UK media industry. A central concern is to examine the degree of autonomy, choice and control experienced by older people wishing to negotiate a different kind of employment transition up to and beyond retirement. Such notions of choice and liberty are explored using a theoretical lens supplied by the sociologist Nikolas Rose. His 'powers of freedom' thesis helps to expose the contradictory tensions in the employment relationship for professionals in later life.

This article begins by examining the ageing labour force and the pronounced patterns of economic participation among men and women aged 50 and over compared to their younger counterparts.<sup>1</sup> This is followed by a rationale for studying certain forms of employment flexibility among the oldest cohorts in the working age population. A section on methods begins with an explanation of why the media industry in the UK was chosen as the location for the research and continues with brief details of the methodological approach. The empirical findings are reported in three main sections: the first examines the client-employer's perspective in the freelance employment relationship, the second looks at the individual freelancer's perspective, and the third focuses closely on the opportunities and barriers involved in freelancing in later life. The prime aim is to examine the extent of choice, freedom and autonomy experienced by portfolio professionals in late career.

## The ageing labour force

A number of studies have documented the increasing exodus of older men from the workforce at progressively younger ages in the UK (Bone et al., 1992; Taylor and Urwin, 1999) and in other industrialized countries (Jacobs et al., 1991; Walker and Maltby, 1997). Employment rates for men aged 55 to 65 fell by 21.2 percent over two decades, from 79.4 percent in 1979 to 58.3 percent in 1997 (Campbell, 1999: 2). Older women, meanwhile, have failed to share in the unprecedented rise in female labour force participation rates since the post-war period (Bower, 2001; Ginn and Arber, 1995, 1996). Although employment rates for the over 50s have risen since 1997, they remain well below rates for people aged 25 to 49 years (Department for Work and Pensions, 2002a).

Ironically, early exit has occurred at a time of unprecedented population ageing among advanced economies. In the UK, the population aged 50 plus is projected to grow from 19.6 million people in 2001 to 25.1 million in 2021.

More importantly, the population of working age (currently defined as 16 to 65 years for men, 16 to 60 for women) will become much older (Office for National Statistics, 1999). Rising longevity, at a time of dwindling rates of economic activity among older people, has led to widespread concern over the fiscal consequences. Recent debates over the declining ratio of paid workers to non-tax-paying dependants, the withdrawal of company final salary pension schemes and predictions of insufficient retirement savings for future generations have perpetuated international concern over the sustainability of welfare provision in the coming decades (Auer and Fortuny, 1999).

The reasons for low employment rates among the oldest members of the labour force are complex. They involve a combination of 'push' factors, such as age discriminatory practices in recruitment, promotion, training and exit, and 'pull' factors, including a lack of attractive, flexible employment options for older people. Research in the UK has found that older employees are more likely to be made redundant than younger people (except for the under 25s age group) and once unemployed, find it harder to find secure re-employment (Field, 1997; Lissenburgh and Smeaton, 2003). This is supported by case study research on the experiences of UK managers in organizations undergoing change. In the various work settings explored by McGovern et al. (1998), Mulholland (1998), and Cohen and Mallon (1999), loyal, long-serving employees were seen as vulnerable, expendable and out-of-place. The introduction of human resource management practices is said to have disadvantaged older employees (Lyon et al., 1998). By their length of service, mature members of the workplace are seen as part of the pre-existing order.

These studies are part of a larger volume of research pointing to deep-rooted age discrimination in the workplace (e.g. Arrowsmith and McGoldrick, 1996; Department for Work and Pensions, 2001; Thompson, 1991; Walker, 1993). In response, governments have introduced a range of policy measures designed to extend working lives (Taylor, P., 2002). In the UK, legislation outlawing age discrimination in employment and vocational training will come into force in 2006. In the meantime, the Government's Green Paper on retirement recommended a number of incentives to further arrest trends in early exit and encourage people to work up to and beyond state retirement age (Department for Work and Pensions, 2002b).

One important mechanism in the drive to extend working lives is seen as the increasingly flexible labour market. As far back as 1980, the International Labour Organization was recommending flexible employment options for those older people who wanted them (Auer and Fortuny, 1999: Box 5, p. 34). Since then, flexible retirement/employment has been recommended with regularity by policy makers hoping to solve the difficulties experienced by older workers in securing paid employment (Cabinet Office, 2000; *Foresight* Ageing Population Panel, 2000; Employment Department Group, 1994; OECD, 1995; Platman, 2004).

Flexible routes into and out of the labour market appear both sensible and progressive given trends towards casualization in the global economy (Mangan,

2000). In Britain, authors such as Cully et al. (1999) and Purcell (2000) have described the blurring of traditional employment boundaries and an ever-greater variety of contractual working arrangements. During the 1990s, the growth of 'non-standard' or 'atypical' labour appeared to signal the end of the life-long corporate career. More recent research has questioned this, suggesting that permanent staff positions appear to be an enduring feature of the workplace (Doogan, 2001; Taylor, R., 2002b). However, one analysis of employment tenure (Doogan, 2001) relied on time and age frames that failed to chart shifting tenure patterns among the longest-serving and oldest members of the labour force. Other research points to the growing dissatisfaction of the 50-plus age group with the UK workplace (Taylor, R., 2002a). Meanwhile, flexible jobs have become increasingly important for the 50-plus age group. Self-employment rates increase with age, especially among men over 60 years (Dex and McCulloch, 1997; Labour Market Spotlight, 2003: Fig. 5, p. 117; Moralee, 1998). Women over 50 who are still in work are more likely to be part-time than full-time (McKay and Middleton, 1998).

### **Portfolio working in later life**

One type of flexibility, the 'portfolio' career, appears especially attractive to older professionals in the 'new' age of flexibility. Older portfolio workers operate outside rigid organizational boundaries and, thus, are able to escape formal retirement thresholds (Handy, 1991, 1995). Individuals and employers are now free to negotiate a different relationship – one supposedly involving mutually beneficial outcomes. Importantly, 'portfolio' workers can continue to do as much or as little paid work as they choose, for as long as they want. Vocational guides to freelancing see the inherent lack of fixed retirement thresholds as ideal for those in their 50s and older (Gray, 1987: 25–6; Laurance, 1988: 14; Marriott and Jacobs, 1995: 3). Freelancing means that discrimination on grounds of age may be far less significant, since individuals are judged on what they can do rather than whether their face fits.

Studies about workers' experiences of self-employment, freelancing and portfolio work have proliferated since the mid-1990s. Examples include research into magazine freelancers (Ekinsmyth, 1999; Stanworth and Stanworth, 1995), freelance translators (Fraser and Gold, 2001; Gold and Fraser, 2002), public sector professionals (Davies, 2001), health service managers (Mallon, 1998a; Mallon, 1998b), and freelance journalists (Baines, 1999; Baines, 2000). However, this literature is deficient in two key respects. Firstly, it gives little attention to the concerns and practices of client-employers. Rarely do we hear the voices of the managers who commission and supervise the work of these self-employed individuals. Thus, these studies fail to examine the way employment is negotiated between individuals – specifically between client-employers and workers – on a day-to-day basis.

Secondly, although such research has increasingly addressed gender issues (Ekinsmyth, 1999; Gill and Dodd, 2000; Willis and Dex, 1999), the position of older workers has been neglected. Studies generally fail to draw out or examine in detail the age-specific issues which may handicap or aid the viability of a portfolio career in later life. Ekinsmyth (1999) and Gill and Dodd (2000) suggest that older workers may be disadvantaged by age stereotyping, a lack of IT skills and a depletion of networks. Conversely, they may benefit from a wealth of experience and a commitment to working for multiple clients. According to Hirsch (2000: 1), the self-employed 'portfolio' consultant, able to wind down after a lifetime's job, commands a privileged position in the labour market. Likewise, Hicks (2001) sees such well-educated older professionals as unusual in being able to undertake flexible and satisfying assignments for high fees.

How, then, might certain groups of older workers, in one sector of the UK economy, experience the freedoms and insecurities of the new individualized age of employment? Can portfolio work, undertaken beyond the boundaries of large and formal media institutions, allow older workers to circumvent ageist structures? To what extent does portfolio-type working allow older professionals to construct their own route map through profound and continuous change?

The research investigated these questions by assembling a diverse study group of informants concerned with the daily practice of portfolio-type work in the UK's media industry. The aim was to construct a composite picture of how work was secured, managed and sustained over time. This entailed gaining a detailed understanding of the component parts of the employment relationship, by exploring a contrasting range of portfolios, work settings and professional specialisms.

### Locating older freelancers in the media industry

The research was located in the UK's media industry for a number of reasons. Firstly, portfolio work has been common in parts of the industry for many decades, albeit under the more commonly known name of 'freelancing'. Although there are distinctions between the portfolio and the freelance career – for instance, Charles Handy also included unpaid voluntary work in his portfolio model – they share many common features. In their ideal typical form, both presume a succession of assignments for a range of clients, with jobs being limited to specified periods of time. Both regard individuals as self-employed and operating alone (i.e. without employees). Finally, both are relatively mobile and autonomous employment forms where individuals can choose their own mix of clients and projects.

Freelancing as an employment form is said to have originated in the Middle Ages, when the term described soldiers who offered their lances to those nobleman who were prepared to pay (Morris, 1995: 79; Simpson and Weiner, 1989: vol. 6, p. 166). Free-lances were seen as free agents, without permanent bonds to any one individual. More recent definitions retain this idea of autonomy. Freelance workers are commonly defined as those without *'long-term*

*contractual commitments to any one employer or company...*' (Gove, 1961: 906) and who are *'not employed continuously but hired to do specific assignments'* (Collins English Dictionary, 2000: 610). Typically, they are self-employed professionals selling services based on their experience, skills and expertise to a range of employers (Laurance, 1988: 3–4).<sup>2</sup>

The publication of early freelance 'survival' guides in the UK suggests that freelancing was already an established way of working for journalists in the newspaper industry in the 1920s and 1930s (Aldrich, 1935; Hyde, 1928). Although mobility between media sub-sectors and employers has always tended to be relatively high, the expectation until the early 1980s, for men at least, was for reasonable continuity of permanent employment. This was especially so in the larger and more stable organizations, like the major broadcasters and national/regional newspaper groups. From the mid-1980s, however, a number of profound changes began to take place: the deregulation of the industry, the intensification of competition, the weakening of collective bargaining and rapid technological convergence.

By the mid-1990s, many jobs that had once been permanent were now freelance or contract. In the broadcasting sub-sector, for instance, the proportion of freelancers rose from 39 percent of the total workforce in 1989 to 54 percent in 1994, making it the predominant form of work (Skillset, 2000; Woolf and Holly, 1994). These trends were apparent not only in the television, film and video sub-sectors, but also in book publishing (Granger et al., 1995) and print magazines (Gall, 1998).

The successive waves of restructuring, 'downsizing' and organizational change appeared to affect the oldest media professionals disproportionately. This was due largely to relatively generous redundancy and early retirement schemes, which rewarded length of service (Platman and Tinker, 1998). 'Sweetheart deals' (where departing staff are assured of favourable freelance contracts), in conjunction with early-exit pay-offs, appeared to act as the springboard to successful freelance careers among the oldest age groups.

A further reason for locating the research in this sector is its fluid or 'boundaryless' composition. There has been a growing convergence of information systems, telecommunications and media technologies, leading to an expansion in multimedia and digital outlets, providers, producers and retailers (Department of Trade and Industry, 1998; Hooper, 1996). News agencies make cable television programmes; broadcasters publish magazines and books; newspapers run information services on the World Wide Web; and Internet companies broadcast television documentaries and radio shows. Previously distinct sectors have become increasingly inter-dependent and inter-connected. Such a context represented a potentially rich mix of freelance portfolios for this study.

At the same time, Government-funded research has shown that parts of the media have been expanding rapidly (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2001). The media industry is seen as vibrant and increasingly valuable in terms of income generation, exports and employment. According to 1998 Government estimates, the creative industries,<sup>3</sup> of which the media industry is

a part, were growing at nearly twice the rate of the economy as a whole, and generating revenues of £60 billion a year. They were contributing more than 4 percent to the domestic economy and employing around 1.5 million people (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 1998: 2). By 2001, revenues had nearly doubled to £112.5 billion, exports were in the region of £10.3 billion and the contribution to the domestic economy had grown to more than 5 percent (Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2001: 00.11). Employment had risen too, in the software and computer services sector, publishing, television and radio.

The media sector, then, provided an expanding and diverse backdrop for the research. Yet, to date, older workers had been relatively invisible in the industry. Where authors mentioned age specifically, this tended to be in personal, anecdotal reports of ageism by media professionals (e.g. Ehrlich, 1999; Neustatter, 1999; Purcell, 1990), rather than as a result of systematic research into age-related issues.

### The diverse study group

The main data source for this research was a study group of 51 people directly involved in the day-to-day practice of freelance working in the UK's media industry.<sup>4</sup> The 9 employers, 13 key informants and 29 freelancers were selected according to 'theoretical' or 'focused' principles. The intention was to maximize variety among research participants so that each became a '*way in*' to the process of freelance labour and its viability in later life (Finch and Mason, 1990: 34). A detailed examination of research methods is to be found elsewhere (Platman, 2001: 58–107), but broadly the methodological approach was to select individuals until the process of freelancing was understood, rather than to accurately represent the freelance population as a whole. A system of targets was used to achieve a spread of ages, media sub-sectors, occupations, work histories and other criteria among participants. None of the informants were 'celebrities' or 'stars' employing their own personal agents at the time of the research, although some freelancers were familiar names to their respective audiences. The aim was to focus on the more 'ordinary' side of freelancing and thus examine the realities for the great majority of individuals. Three main media sub-sectors were chosen for their contrasting histories, employment traditions and technical specialisms: firstly, radio and television broadcasting; secondly, new media; and thirdly, newspaper, magazine and book publishing.

The study group was located through informal social and professional networks.<sup>5</sup> The nine client-employers involved in the research were people in charge of a particular product, strand, section, unit or service and who had some management responsibility for freelancers. They included creative directors, development managers and features editors. The 13 key informants included trade union officials and recruitment consultants with an overview of freelance employment in their sub-sector. Of the 29 freelancers, 7 were aged under 40; 8 were between 40 and 49 years; and 14 were aged 50 plus. The

youngest was 27 years, and the oldest 67 years. The gender mix was roughly even. The number of years spent freelancing varied widely. Among the 50 plus age group, seven individuals had been freelancing for 15 years or more, four individuals for between five and 10 years, and three for five years or less. More than half of the freelancers had children, although only eight of them had young dependants (defined here as under the age of ten). Three of these parents were in their 50s. In addition, freelancers were engaged in a variety of professional tasks and occupations.<sup>6</sup>

In-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with each of the 51 research participants between September 1999 and December 2000, according to a pre-designed interview schedule. Interviews were seen as the most promising way to gain access to complex and fragmented narratives about a shifting employment state (Kvale, 1996; Wengraf, 2001). The focus was on understandings, interpretations, views, experiences, stories and anecdotes of freelance working.<sup>7</sup> Interviews were recorded using mini-discs, which delivered high-quality audio recordings irrespective of the interview location. Repeat face-to-face interviews were conducted with nine freelancers up to 13 months after the first meeting. Informal exchanges via e-mail, telephone and post continued with these individuals as well as with a further 18 freelancers. This longitudinal dimension meant that the study could track the changing fortunes of the study group. This was especially helpful in charting the shifting attitudes and volatile working patterns among freelancers. Interviews were transcribed either in full or part. Transcripts, interview notes, e-mail exchanges and notes of other informal responses were imported into Atlas.ti, a computer-assisted data analysis software package (CAQDAS) for storage, coding, search, retrieval, data linking and conclusion-drawing.<sup>8</sup>

The next two sections examine the freelance employment relationship, firstly from the client-employer's perspective and then the freelancer's. The intention is to focus on the way freelance employment is negotiated on a day-to-day basis. The section that follows examines the attractions and obstacles which apply specifically to the oldest freelancers involved in the research.

## **Negotiating a freelance relationship: the client-employer's perspective**

It is important, first, to understand the way client-employers viewed freelance labour. This section examines the attractions and pitfalls of using freelance workers, and the perceived value of older, experienced freelance talent for client-employers.

### **The attractions of freelance labour**

Media client-employers used freelancers for three core reasons: flexibility, affordability and 'instant' knowledge. Firstly, the freelance pool of labour rep-

resented a large and varied supply of creative and technical professionals. They could be recruited swiftly, without recourse to lengthy and formal recruitment procedures. In theory at least, the client-employer could assemble an exact mix of expertise, in varying numbers and for different periods of time.

Secondly, freelancers represented excellent value for money. Client-employers who relied on freelancers to use their own equipment and work space made substantial savings on overheads. Where the freelancer had self-employed tax status, the employer was not expected to pay for holidays, sick leave, or to contribute to an occupational pension plan. In addition, there were no obligatory training or career development costs. When business was slack, the organization could ride out the lean times with the minimum of expense by shedding those freelancers seen as surplus to current needs.

Thirdly, freelancers provided immediate solutions to their labour and product needs. Client-employers wanted people who were already equipped with the latest skills or technologies. Ideally, 'cutting edge' skills could be extracted in a ready-made form. The client-employer could supplement their core team of in-house staff by gaining, for the duration of the job, more experience, a higher degree of expertise or a new perspective.

### The pitfalls of freelance labour

At one level, older professionals appeared to have many of the attributes which client-employers were looking for in their freelancers. They were more likely to have a proven track record, a range of experience, a sound working knowledge of their specialism and an established informal network. On the whole, the employers interviewed for this study valued the experience that older freelancers could bring to assignments. They recognized that there were times when mature freelancers had the edge over their younger counterparts, perhaps due to a broader understanding of the issues, a better range of contacts, or a more sophisticated grasp of what was required.

On the other hand, client-employers were wary of seasoned professionals who brought 'baggage' with them, in the form of set ways of working or outdated attitudes. They were alert to signs which marked out the prospective freelancer as a relic of another era. They wanted fresh approaches, new names or faces, a different 'spin'. They were wary of complacency in their choice of freelancers, and of relying on the 'same old, same-olds', to use the phrase of the development head of an independent broadcasting production company.

Yet, at the same time, employers expected freelancers to 'fit in' and to share their 'vision'. They were cautious of entrusting work to individuals who might find their methods questionable or alien. They needed to identify any mismatches or tensions in advance. Budgets had dwindled, technology had advanced and customers had become more demanding. The pressures of modern media management were such that employers could not risk intransigence or rigidity from their freelancers. Client-employers who relied on freelancers to

deliver a substantial proportion of their work tended, almost by definition, to be constrained by heavy workloads and unpredictable schedules.

Alongside time and creative pressures were financial constraints. Client-employers needed to meet tight budgetary controls and this entailed delivering swift, cost-conscious projects to tight deadlines. Only in rare instances were organizations prepared to pay premium rates for their freelancers. These instances included 'star turns', such as high profile columnists and celebrity presenters, who enhanced the marketability, branding and appeal of the media product or service; and technically proficient specialists in short supply who were seen as indispensable.

Given these multiple pressures, client-employers needed freelancers in whom they could trust. Ideally, these freelancers both understood and responded willingly to these financial, creative and time pressures. By far the preferred method for finding such empathetic workers was to rely on the informal network. Personal and professional contacts were seen as a ready-made and cost-effective route to a freelance labour supply. It consisted of a range of connections to former and current employees, colleagues, competitors, friends, family and clients. At its most efficient, the network could produce the 'right' freelancer at exactly the right time. It also acted as an early warning system to steer the employer clear of 'difficult' or 'unsuitable' individuals.

### **Negotiating a freelance relationship: the worker's perspective**

We now turn to the freelancer's perspective. Unsurprisingly, a striking feature of freelance operations across age cohorts was their ability to respond to the needs of their client-employers. Individuals appeared to display an 'amoeba-like' capacity to change. Evidence of this was to be found, firstly, in the way freelancers marketed themselves; secondly, in their approaches to project delivery; thirdly, in the setting of fees; and fourthly, in negotiating assignments. These will now be examined in more detail.

#### **Marketing**

When asked for a job title during the research interviews, many freelancers found it difficult to settle on one short title or phrase. This was due to the ever-changing nature of their portfolios. One interviewee, a woman aged 44, offered seven different titles to cover her 13 years as a freelancer in the broadcasting sub-sector. Depending on the assignment, she had called herself a freelance producer-director, a communications consultant, an editorial co-ordinator, a development executive, a lecturer, a training consultant and a manager. These were labels to cover all, or at least most, eventualities. They were indicative of the way freelancers could cross occupational boundaries and appear in different guises to suit the organizational requirements.

One of the oldest freelancers, a broadcaster, writer and communications consultant aged 59 years, had built his 'amoebic' properties into his marketing pitch:

... If you look at my letterhead, I say something like: 'Communications, training and consultancy'. Which more or less covers virtually everything you can think of .... I would have thought for me, breadth of activity and flexibility have been the secrets, really.

This freelancer had cast his net wide, so to speak, by describing his business activities in the broadest possible terms. Another older freelancer, aged 51, found that 'every two years, I've changed my market completely.' During her 30-year freelance career, she had had 'to move sideways the whole time' in order to seize whatever openings might present themselves.

Far from this being a pre-designed strategy, though, such flexible poses tended to be opportunistic responses to the market place. Older freelancers tended to accept this inability to plan ahead as a given feature of freelancing. The fact that they were still freelancing at their relatively advanced age was a reflection of their ability to adopt a malleable stance to marketing and work search.

### Project delivery

In the main, freelancers were prepared to go to great lengths to deliver exactly what the client requested at the specified time. They gave examples of meeting deadlines even when they were ill; working continuously for long periods even when it could damage their health; and postponing holidays to suit the client. There are parallels here with the flexibility and 'instant' solutions demanded by employers, mentioned above. No matter what the mitigating circumstances, freelancers were aware that a client's sympathies could be short-lived. The following freelancer, a broadcaster, writer and communications consultant aged 59, believed in honouring the deadline irrespective of his own ill-health:

I work on the fairly cynical principle that people are really not interested in your private life. They're not interested in your illnesses. They're not interested in your children's sports days and so on. They're interested in the job that they pay you to do.

Such sentiments echo the strength of position of client-employers in selecting and de-selecting their favoured freelancers.

### Setting fees

A third way in which freelancers demonstrated their ability to bend to the needs of client-employers was in fee-setting. On the whole, individuals tended to be extremely cautious about the way they approached the subject of money with client-employers. Even those prepared to question set rates were sensitive to the

constraints under which the client-employer was operating. Demanding more money was a potentially fraught and risky enterprise and the majority of the freelancers involved in this study simply accepted whatever was on offer, at least most of the time. There were occasions, however, when the fee was seen as so low that even the most reticent individual felt duty bound to ask for more.

It was noticeable that those freelancers prepared to argue systematically for higher fees tended to be men rather than woman. This is not to suggest that all of the men and none of the women adopted a more aggressive fees policy. There were many men who were prepared to leave fees unchallenged. The important point, though, is that even those men prepared to argue for improved remuneration did so with considerable tact and sensitivity. Two of the older male freelancers – a 59-year-old broadcaster, writer and communications consultant and a 58-year-old publishing consultant, writer and editor – both said they always charged as much as they thought they could get away with. But their claims were far from the rash and extravagant demands which one might suppose from such a statement. The phrase ‘as much as they could get away with’ was, in fact, based on a sensitive reading of the resources available to the client-employer and their own relative value to the organization. Only when the client was in desperate straits could the freelancer adopt a more cavalier approach.

### Negotiating assignments

Stories of conflict over the non-financial terms of an assignment were also rare among freelance interviewees. There was a recognition that being ‘difficult’ was a hazardous enterprise. There appeared to be a general reluctance by freelancers to engage in behaviour that could be interpreted by employers as awkward or inconvenient. Evidence of this reticence to confront or make demands of employers emerged in the accounts of the way work was undertaken. Freelancers had to be careful about questioning or challenging employment practices, even if they were patently unfair. Freelancers appeared to have only one form of retribution: withdrawal of labour. Unless they were highly valued and integral to the client’s operations, their position was weak. The following quote from a freelancer in her 50s reveals the prevailing resignation among freelancers:

Interviewer: How strong is your position to say, ‘Right I’m not going to work for you any more?’

Freelancer: Oh easily, you can just not. It’s because it’s no skin off their nose. It’s your loss really ...

Freelancers who took a stand had to be prepared for the consequences. Interviewees did reveal the rare occasions when they refused work, challenged working practices and, even, had arguments with commissioners. The outcome was usually the loss of further work. The stark realities of a freelance career are

captured most succinctly by the owner of a news and photographic agency. Describing the prevailing attitudes to freelancers in his sub-sector, he said:

You know, if I'm not happy with an employee, it's up to me to nurture them as much as possible to get what I want out of them, rather than just say, 'You're sacked.' But if a freelancer pisses me off once, I'll just get rid of them.

The features editor of a national daily newspaper, who prided herself for establishing good relations with her regular freelancers, described them as being 'very, very sensible'. Asked to elaborate, she replied:

...well, they won't get their (freelance) commissions again. You know, and there's a million people who want to do it...there's lots of good people out there. I mean, when I say that I can always think of one person who'd be perfect, I can always think of somebody else who could do it ...

Such sentiments reflect the deep insecurities of a freelancer's daily life. The employer was not obliged to extend the work beyond the limits of the agreed assignment. Individuals might hope for continued employment, but they could neither expect nor demand it. It was explicitly understood – although not necessarily welcomed by individuals – that responsibility for a continuous stream of work and income lay with the freelancer. Unlike the protection afforded the permanent member of staff, a freelancer whose employment came to an abrupt end received neither redundancy pay nor help with redeployment or retraining. Freelancers were vulnerable to sudden losses of work. These could happen without explanation or prior warning for a number of economic, organizational and departmental reasons. The media product or service might have been overhauled, have changed direction or ceased operating; the employing organization might have instituted a new regime; the individual who commissioned the freelancer might have acquired new responsibilities, changed jobs, been dismissed, left the industry or retired. Freelancers talked about the regular turnover of commissioners and the revamping of media products, both of which affected their standing as suppliers of labour.

## **Degrees of freedom for older freelancers**

We now turn to the second main research question which this article seeks to address: the extent to which older individuals were able to command a measure of autonomy and discretion in the crafting of their portfolios of work in later life. The analysis of interview transcripts and fieldwork notes for the 14 freelancers aged 50 plus involved in the study did reveal moments when there were degrees of freedom and independence in their freelance work; a balance between paid and unpaid responsibilities and interests; a variety of complementary and satisfying assignments; and a mutually respectful and lucrative relationship with clients. Freelancers could walk away from unreasonable working conditions, such as unrealistic deadlines, unpleasant clients, impossible

briefs or uneconomic rates of pay. Rarely did they resort to this, for reasons that have been explored earlier. Nevertheless, freelancing held undeniable attractions for this older group.

Freelancing for these individuals represented the best, if not the only, form of employment available to them at this stage in their careers. Two of the oldest freelancers in the study, a computer applications developer aged 63 and a freelance photographer aged 67, saw freelancing as the only means by which they could remain employed within the media industry. It was also the mechanism by which they felt they could wind down slowly in the period up to retirement. To an extent, older freelancers felt able to exert choice over the conditions of their employment; in particular, where and when they worked and for whom. Although this was a long way from the free rein that many may have desired, it did represent an element of self-determination. As the 59-year-old freelance broadcaster, writer and communications consultant said:

I feel, compared to people in employment, and I've been employed for ten years with a publisher, I feel totally different. I just feel that I, you know, this is my company, this is my activity. It's my life. I can choose any job I want to do. If somebody offers me something, I can turn it down.

When freelancing delivered a regular and varied source of paid employment, it represented a source of satisfaction for older freelancers. It also meant that individuals could attend to pressing domestic matters, such as the ill-health of friends or family, bereavements and childcare, although this was unpaid, of course.

However, such portrayals of freelancing had to be set against, firstly, the insecurities of this form of work detailed earlier and, secondly, the disincentives which appeared to apply to the older freelance work force in particular. These took the form of:

- limits to financial rewards for the most experienced freelancers;
- barriers to the cultivation of harmonious relations with client-employers; and
- difficulties in satisfying client-employer needs.

These will now be explored in more detail.

### The limits to financial rewards

For the majority of older freelancers, pressures had intensified in the media industry and rewards had diminished. Many client-employers demanded faster turnarounds and a more intense way of working, but offered only limited increases in fees. Occasionally, freelancers spoke of surprising generosity from clients – an unexpected *ex gratia* payment or a rise in their fees. More usually, freelancers were aware of the growing disparity over time between their experience and their financial rewards.

The disappointment felt by the oldest and most experienced freelancers in the study group is illustrated by the case of a freelance publishing consultant, writer and editor, aged 58. He believed he had earned a reputation for salvaging book projects, a skill increasingly in demand as publishing companies had been forced to produce more books amid resource constraints. Yet, despite his ability to 'rescue' projects with 'fairly nightmarish' deadlines, he was unable to demand anything more than a marginal premium. As a result, he was only just staying solvent, despite his skills and experience. He felt he was charging the maximum that he felt he could get away with, and still retain the client. But given the precision needed for his work, and the pace at which he was able to go, he felt there was virtually no room for financial increases.

Older, experienced freelancers were aware that they could be more expensive than their younger counterparts. There was a tension between wanting to charge what they felt they were worth, and wanting to offer competitive rates. A number of older freelancers had been in senior posts in media organizations before their freelance days: a senior producer-director for a large ITV company; a literary editor for a national newspaper; a commissioning editor for a publishing house; a chief personnel officer for a corporate division; and a head of public affairs for another major ITV company. These were well-paid jobs with status and responsibility. Yet, unless they fell into the 'star turn' or 'freelancer-in-short-supply' categories, they could charge only what the market and their client-employer would bear.

### Barriers to harmonious relations with client-employers

Where commissioners were less experienced than freelancers, there could be tensions in the relationship. It was galling for freelancers who had been operating for some considerable time to be offered inappropriate guidance, mistaken fees or unappreciative comments. For older freelancers, there was the feeling that, as they aged, the client-employers appeared to be getting younger all the time. Freelancers could feel increasingly out of step with the preoccupations of their (ever-younger or comparatively younger) clients.

A discussion between five freelancers in the broadcasting sub-sector dwelt at length on their concerns over a lack of the most basic management training for individuals who had the power to hire them. This comment was made by one of the older members of the group, a freelance producer-director and training consultant, aged 51:

You're just expected to come and do the job and (clicks fingers) on you go. You know, sign off. But you go, 'Hang on a minute. It's more than that. We're bringing experience, wisdom, talent, knowledge, creativity to your company. Excuse me.' And I'm in my 50s too and I see – and I'm not being ageist about this – but I'm sorry, (I've been) 35 years (in the industry and people are) trying to tell me what my job is. I mean, they just don't have...they've not been on board long enough. So there is a real problem there of age gaps ...

He felt his freelance skills had been devalued by the insensitive attitudes of client-employers. Rarely did they seem to understand the degree of expertise and commitment which he and other freelancers like him brought to projects. Their dismissive attitude was harder to bear as the division widened between a freelancer's and a client-employer's experience and age.

Freelancers interviewed for this study reported an emphasis by employers on cutting corners rather than issuing fair and open terms of employment, and a reluctance to offer feedback about performance or to acknowledge the contribution made by freelancers. Given the short duration of many projects, and the high turnover of client-employers, experienced freelancers could find themselves 'beginning again', in effect, in order to establish their credentials and gain further work. It was a relentless process. The uncertainties and insecurities of freelancing appeared to remain in place, irrespective of a person's age or experience.

Equally important was the danger of a diminishing pool of professional contacts. Research in the television sub-sector found that time spent maintaining and replenishing networks tended to decline with age among creative production workers in freelance and staff positions (Dex et al., 2000). Less than half (47%) of respondents aged 50 years and over spent time maintaining job-seeking contacts, compared to 73 percent of those in their 20s, 63 percent in their 30s and 55 percent in their 40s. Whilst the older age groups might be relying on networks that had been built up over many years, such patterns suggest an increasing distance with age from active network hubs.

Equally, reputations could become tarnished over time. One freelancer had found that his experience as a producer-director had been a disadvantage in his search for work. He was aware that his considerable track record in certain types of documentary programme-making, and his reputation as an experienced hand, had hampered rather than helped him win commissions. (See Box 1.)

### Satisfying client-employer needs

Freelancers were expected to organize and finance their own training, but there were disincentives to doing so, due to the costs and time involved. There was pressure to master new equipment rapidly, since it was usually done in the freelancer's own time. Where a freelancer was reliant on the latest computer or technical equipment, he or she could feel disadvantaged by the speed of change and the cost of keeping up-to-date.

According to existing research, older freelancers are less likely to have received training, or say they need training, than their younger counterparts in the media industry (British Film Institute, 1997; Varlaam, 1998; Woolf and Holly, 1994). Whilst 28 percent of freelancers in their 20s had been on a training course in the last 12 months, only 11 percent of the over 50s had done so (Varlaam, 1998; Table 12, p. 31). Such patterns are symptomatic of wider trends in training among older workers in the UK (Platman, 1999). Given the work experience of older freelance professionals in the UK media industry, it is perhaps unsurprising that they felt less in need of training. However, such pat-

**Box 1** A Case Study of the Freelance Producer-Director:

The following case focuses on a freelance producer-director who had worked for many years as a presenter, producer and director for one of the major broadcasters. He had been regarded as a highly experienced and successful programme-maker and was now freelancing in the broadcasting sector. His name had been put forward for a new documentary series but had been rejected by a (younger) commissioning editor. The freelancer offered the example as 'a chilling story' of, firstly, his lack of bargaining power, and, secondly, of the way his prior record and experience had appeared to work against him.

The news of the commissioning editor's decision had been relayed to him by telephone. He found the decision perplexing and wrote to the individual for an explanation.

I've got the letter somewhere. It's only about three lines, you know. It says something like, 'Of course I respect your ability, etc., but I didn't think you'd deliver the visual style that I was looking for.' And, I mean, this was before anyone had worked out what the series was about. What was in it. You know, you don't work out the visual style before you begin, anyway, so it was load of old nonsense ... (but) that was the end of that. Because you can't argue...

The rejection had been a financial and professional blow. Not only did the freelancer regard it as unjust, but also as misunderstanding the skills and expertise he could have brought to the series.

...it lost me what in effect would have been a fascinating year's work, a book and maybe sixty grand .... I remember coming home afterwards and I was just absolutely devastated. And also the fact that there wasn't – if when I'd turned on the programme it had been, you know, modern style, wonky camera, like that, I would have thought, 'Oh yes, I see what they mean.' Because I would never do that and they're quite right. But it wasn't. ... So that's very difficult as well, really. And you don't have, it's very difficult to deal with that. Because you think, 'What am I supposed to do now?'

The encounter had suggested to him that his prior reputation and lengthy experience in the industry had been a handicap rather than a bonus. His record of achievement as a programme-maker and writer was of limited help in securing a regular income and a vibrant career in his 50s.

terms are troubling given the rapid changes to processes, systems and technology within the industry.

Although older freelancers wished for control over when, where and how they worked, freelancing did not lend itself to such manipulations. Freelancers could never predict accurately when their next assignment would arrive, how long it would last and how intensively it would need to be undertaken. Turning away jobs that appeared undesirable risked terminating a potentially useful and important flow of work. One freelancer described the gamble involved in cutting back. Aged 63, he wanted more free time and felt overwhelmed by the volume of work. But he said it was hard to know which client or which work to stop. Even a freelance computer applications developer aged 63, who felt his

freelance career had declined gradually in a satisfactory manner, had been wary of taking time off when it was inconvenient to his client.

## Discussion and conclusions

In his essays on freedom, Nikolas Rose argues that choice, liberty and autonomy have become defining features of our daily lives (Rose, 1999). They shape our values, permeate our relationships and underpin our institutions. So pervasive are these notions that they have altered irretrievably our ethical and political ideas, systems, policies and practices.

As the twenty-first century begins, the ethics of freedom have come to underpin our conceptions of how we should be ruled, how our practices of everyday life should be organized, how we should understand ourselves and our predicament. (Rose, 1999: 61)

Freedom is not an aspirational state, according to Rose, but a condition of living. We are obliged to be free and are made so by a transformation of our attitudes and values. Relating this to employment in contemporary society, the permanent, lifelong job is no longer the 'ideal' to which we strive as individuals. Instead, we are entrepreneurs, intent on shaping our own flexible employment destinies. Freedom in the labour market becomes a practical and technical process involving self-mastery and self-determination. The price of maximum freedom, however, is maximum fragmentation and uncertainty. Individuals are forced to survive a workplace 'saturated with insecurity' (Rose: 158). Work is no longer a permanent, lifelong contract, but 'a vulnerable zone' where relationships are continually assessed and evaluated (Rose: 158).

The writings of the 20th-century philosopher Isaiah Berlin (Berlin, 1969; Hardy, 2002) highlight the intractable dilemmas associated with notions of liberty and freedom in society. The right to shape our working lives as we wish – to make independent and autonomous choices as paid labour – has also been contested terrain within the sociology of work, notably in the gender literature. The extent of genuine choice among working women has been debated for a number of years (see discussions over women's job preferences in the writings of Crompton and Harris, 1998; Ginn et al., 1996; Hakim, 1991, 1995, 1996).

Nevertheless, Rose's theoretical lens offers a useful framework for understanding the pursuit of freedom among one section of the labour market with a great deal to gain (and lose) from an increasingly flexible workplace. The findings of the study reported here revealed that portfolio work offered the prospect of unrivalled opportunities for individuals wanting to tailor-make late life careers. Older people were unconstrained by age-specific corporate employment policies and practices. In theory, older freelancers had discretion over the timing and nature of their retirement. Several further 'freedoms', to use Nikolas Rose's expression, follow on from this right to remain in paid employment beyond a premature or 'normal' exit from an organization. Older people were also free to:

- earn fees in order to supplement a state benefit or an occupational or private pension;
- vary output, and thus earning power, according to lifestyle and health preferences;
- pursue stimulating and satisfying paid work in later life; and
- remain part of a professional community engaged in creative projects, irrespective of advancing years.

Again, in theory, older freelancers could pick-and-mix their assignments, clients and work schedules. They could juggle work with other interests or responsibilities, and build in free, discretionary time. They could concentrate on varied and stimulating assignments, and diversify and acquire new skills.

The ability to recruit casual labour also amounted to a substantial freedom for employers. Freelancers could be hired at precisely the right time, and either for a specified number of days/weeks/months or for a set brief. Where networks were established, employers could tap into a ready supply of temporary labour, without recourse to expensive recruitment campaigns. Uncertainty in the commissioning process, or sudden changes in client demand, could be handled by reducing or increasing the freelance labour supply accordingly. When the work dried up, employers were free to sever links with their freelancers, either temporarily or for good. There were no redundancy or redeployment costs.

The responsibilities of the employer went no further than the terms of the specified contract. *S/he* was free to switch off the relationship without fuss or retribution. Freelancers who were seen as unsuitable could be ejected without explanation. Freelancers were exposed to constant scrutiny and evaluated on the basis of each submission of work. Output deemed unsatisfactory could lead to a swift termination. Employers wanted 'freelancers-to-go': ready-made, affordable and available experts who could help them deliver assignments on time and to brief.

Freelancers needed to be sensitive to this employment context. They did so by developing a malleability which allowed them to respond swiftly to prevailing employment opportunities. Those older freelancers who survived did so by being responsive to difficult assignments, working conditions and deadlines. They were cautious about setting over-inflated rates, taking holidays that were inconvenient to the client and rejecting promising new sources of work. Open hostilities were rare. Withdrawing labour, rather than haranguing the employer, was a more effective sanction. However, this could end in a Pyrrhic victory, where the freelancer lost the client for good. The best protection appeared to be a shrewd understanding of, and adjustment to, the pressures faced by the employer.

Research informants were clear on the injustices and insecurities of a freelance existence. They recognized and expressed openly the limits to their freedoms as freelancers. Client-employers could be unfair, thoughtless, neglectful, rude and impossible. They could also be generous, appreciative and empathetic. Whatever the setback or encouragement, freelancers were aware of the

uncertainties and hostilities of a casual labour market. If they had once been naïve, these notions had long since disappeared in the daily practice of freelance working. The over-riding preoccupation of freelancers was to understand and navigate the day-to-day demands of their client-employers. It is important to emphasize that these clients were often former colleagues, friends, associates and peers. In some cases, freelancers who were fulfilling project work one day might recruit other freelancers as the client-employer the next. The lines were far too blurred to represent anything like a clear-cut division between workers and employers, exploited and exploiters.

Choice and control might have been states to which individuals aspired, but they were separate from the daily devices and practices that constituted a freelancer's life. To reject, challenge and criticize the mechanisms by which freelancers earned their living was to question their role and legitimacy in pursuing this form of work. The pursuit of freedom, to progress Rose's line, was the rationale for and an organizing principle in the employment relationship.

The paradox of freedom was that release from organizational restraint was, itself, restraining, since individuals were now responsible for their own welfare. On the one hand, there was a 'positive' pole of self-expression, independence and control; on the other, a 'negative' pole of fragmentation and uncertainty. Individuals were forced to survive a workplace 'saturated' with risk. Those older workers who survived did so by acknowledging that their own making lay in no hands but their own (Brown, 1995: 24). Freedom was not a final destination, but a perpetual act of (re)negotiation. The insecurities and instability, however, could be overwhelming. Older professionals were vulnerable to diminishing rewards, dwindling networks and outdated skills. They were able to exert only limited control over their working lives, due to the need to offer flexible, affordable and 'instant' services to the paying client-employers on whom they depended. Individuals who were unwilling or unable to engage in such a process found their own form of release – by abandoning their freelance careers altogether.

Thus, the writings of Nikolas Rose help to highlight, firstly, the technical and practical rules of engagement for portfolio workers and their client-employers and, secondly, the interweaving of possibilities (positives) and pitfalls (negatives) in the employment relationship. Yet, Rose's lens fails to give sufficient weight to the critical role of age in shaping the experience of risk in the flexible labour market.

A number of authors have suggested that certain socio-economic groups may be especially disadvantaged by the growth in casualized forms of employment (e.g. Castells, 1996). In their separate critiques of Beck's risk regime thesis, Ekinsmyth (1999) and Mythen (2001) point to the persistence of 'traditional inequalities' such as class, gender, ethnicity and age – which they said Beck had downplayed – in mediating the experience of risk in the labour market.

In this study, portfolio working was found to be an inherently risky form of employment for all members of the freelance workforce. However, the risks were experienced unequally. Those who were shouldering heavy caring respon-

sibilities, suffering poor health or disabilities, in possession of dated or old-fashioned skills and out of touch with those individuals able to offer them work, were especially vulnerable. Unless rapid and intensive action was taken to reverse declines in their portfolios of work, individuals found themselves in a downward employment spiral where contacts, skills and clients diminished, and their 'portfolio careers' inevitably came to a halt.

The blocks to freelancing for those in later life were subtle and complex. Further research is needed on the fortunes of older freelancers working in other sectors in the UK, such as in health care, education and craft-based occupations. As a group, older freelancers in the media industry tended to be relatively invisible and this became more so as their skills and networks diminished. There was a marked absence of official retirement parties or farewell dinners for lone freelancers approaching the end of their working lives. Instead, older freelancers became increasingly detached and isolated from sources of paid work. The lack of media industry protection, training and support for the oldest members of the freelance community further exacerbated their vulnerability in the workplace. Ironically, then, Government policies which seek to encourage flexible work options for older people may lead to a greater rather than a diminished need for welfare safety nets, certainly in highly de-regulated industries like the media. The dismantling of labour market 'rigidities' might encourage flexible employment relations and individual capacities for freedom on the one hand. But, on the other, such measures will lead to a precarious existence for certain groups of older workers.

## Notes

- 1 The age of 50 years is chosen because it is a widely used threshold for eligibility for early retirement packages. It is also a common, although not universal, age cut-off for labour force analyses of UK economic activity rates among the oldest cohorts in the working age population.
- 2 It is important to note the substantial minority of freelancers in the media industry who are contracted to one employer on a succession of contracts. Skillset, the National Training Organization for the audio-visual industries, found that 22 percent of its sample of freelancers who were currently working (for companies which were not their own) had been in continuous work with their current employer for 12 months or more (Woolf and Holly, 1994). Skillset defines a freelancer as anyone on a contract of less than 365 days and/or who is registered for tax purposes as self-employed (Skillset, 2000). This embraces a variety of freelance types, from the individual serving many organizations to the 'pseudo' member of staff employed on a succession of continuous short-term contracts for only one employer.
- 3 The creative industries were defined by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport as: *'those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property'* (Department for Culture,

- Media and Sport, 2001). This included book, newspaper, magazine and digital content publishing; television and radio production and broadcasting; photography, filming and digital recording; multimedia and internet design and production; and film and video production.
- 4 This primary data was supplemented by a large volume of published reports, journal articles and conference papers on working conditions in the media industry. None specifically examined the position of older workers, although this material was invaluable in documenting the prevailing employment conditions among staff and freelancers in magazines, newspapers, film and television broadcasting and new media design.
  - 5 ‘Snowballing’, as the technique is known, is seen as a valuable research tool for sampling isolated or impenetrable social groupings (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). Access to older freelancers through other means, such as job registers, union listings or company records, was seen as unlikely to elicit the range of backgrounds, characteristics and sub-sectors required for the research. In addition, informal networking conformed to the conventions of the industry. Studies of freelance working have confirmed the importance of informal networks for matching freelancers to assignments in the film industry (Blair, 2001), in television (BFI Centre for Audience and Industry Research, 1999) and in new media (Gill and Dodd, 2000). However, one danger of ‘snowballing’ is the potential for ‘cloned’ respondents, with each person at risk of being much like the next in terms of traits, interests or patterns. To prevent this, 15 separate ‘snowballing’ chains were launched, each starting from a different networking source. As these separate trajectories unfolded, they were plotted on a ‘network mapping’ chart in order to record outcomes and monitor the degree of overlap. These chains were found to operate as largely autonomous routes to contacts and informants.
  - 6 In the newspaper, magazine and book publishing sub-sector, jobs involved editing, illustrating, photography and writing. In the television and radio broadcasting sub-sector, individuals were directing, producing, presenting, props buying, consulting, training and project managing. In the new media sub-sector, they were involved in multimedia production, design, animation and software programming. It is worth noting that a number of freelancers were also working for clients outside the media industry, such as in higher education, health and social services.
  - 7 Respondents were promised anonymity in order to allow them to talk frankly about the problems, constraints and barriers that they encountered. Preserving anonymity entailed more than the dropping of names and company affiliations from descriptions of their cases. Freelancers, employers and key informants had vivid stories to retell and distinctive work histories. This was a relatively small and cohesive set of sub-sectors, where gossip and close liaisons thrived. In order to ensure that individuals were not recognized, quotes and incidents were checked for identifiers.
  - 8 Broadly speaking, data analysis conformed, firstly, to the tenets of abductive reasoning (Blaikie, 1993) and, secondly, to procedures commonly associated with grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1994, 1998). Theory generation was seen as *‘intimately involved in the process of research rather than being something that precedes it’* (Blaikie, 1993: 191). The analysis was circular, iterative and reflexive: facts gathered during fieldwork influenced ideas and con-

cepts which, in turn, informed further waves of data gathering, analysis and emergent theories.

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