

WHY THE DEATH OF THE THREE-STAGE LIFE DOESN'T HAVE TO MEAN THE END OF A FULFILLING LIFE!

by Glenn Williams



As a leader, where do you see yourself in five years? How about ten years? What's your career trajectory, and does retirement factor into your thinking?

As you ponder these questions, what's at the forefront of your mind? Are you thinking about your passions and what you want to accomplish, or is it about your age and the "stage" of life and business you're currently in?

For those born in the post-WWII era (which is most of us), we grew up with the broad pattern of life as a three-stage scenario from education to work to retirement. This means that while there are multiple transitions in life, there are only a couple of significant transitions across our working lives, with an assumption that work ceases as we pass the baton to younger generations.

Particularly in Western capitalist democracies, we've been conditioned to think of our life in three stages: education or some form of learning, work, and retirement. It's the circle of life, right? It's actually only been this way for the last 70-80 years, and its days may well be numbered.

The world is shifting and changing rapidly. It's so fast at times that it's hard to keep up with both the opportunities and challenges. But one thing is becoming abundantly clear: the segmenting inherent in the three-stage life is no longer the reality or even possible for most people.

The 100-year life is here.

The reality is that globally, we have an aging population. At the same time, we're experiencing rapid advances in technology and medical breakthroughs that mean we're likely to live longer – much longer than the three-stage life can support.

While it may feel daunting, I believe it's an incredible opportunity to create lives, careers, and companies that align with our strengths and passions and provide far greater levels of fulfilment for all. So how do we as leaders transition our thinking from what we thought our lives would be to what is next?

The 100-Year Life: Living and Working in an Age of Longevity (2016) and The New Long Life: a Framework for Flourishing in a Changing World (2020)¹ by Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott are inspiring leaders to rethink the fundamentals of not only how, but why we do business.

As Professor Gratton said in an article for the London Business School (2020), "One answer is to shift to a new paradigm. A more flexible life structure that gives us the option of reorganising our time so that assigning activities (leisure, work, learning, sabbaticals, caring) takes place across our whole life – in other words a multi-stage life."²

As leaders, we've often prided ourselves on our ability to compartmentalize our lives, giving everything to

our jobs and kidding ourselves that we can still give 100 per cent to anything else we consider important. But did this approach ever really work? The success of the three-stage life relied heavily on paradigms that were either already or are quickly becoming outmoded. For instance, retirement was designed for a worker likely living a short period after retirement (5-10 years), which was common in the mid-20th century. It also revolved around a male breadwinner supported by a partner who took care of domestic work and family.

We've seen this model crumble over the past three to four decades with a trickle then major influx of women into the paid workforce, even though women are still documented by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as doing more unpaid care and domestic work than men, even as they occupy an almost equal presence in the workplace.³

As current and future leaders in a global business context, it's incumbent on us to rethink our career trajectories and transform our organizations by pioneering a new way. We're in a unique moment in history, and if we can embrace it, we can benefit our businesses, our teams, families, and friends both now and into the future.



Living our collective best life

So, is there another way?

We can no longer separate life from work. We must take every aspect of it into consideration, and when we think about our career, we should align it with our goals and passions. We need to help others tap into their passions and maximising their strengths if we want longevity. The idea of spending years counting down to retirement becomes less appealing when we can work well into our 70's and 80's.

As leaders, our first step is to reimagine our career trajectories and then help our teams and colleagues re-evaluate theirs. Life-long learning must become the norm, and we need to encourage lateral thinking within our businesses. It's not just about youth; we should also value the wisdom, expertise, and maturity that come with longevity; while empowering people move in and through upskilling and side-skilling.

The three-stage life might be nearing its end, but the possibilities for multi-generational collaboration are endless. Let's embrace this new era, align ourselves and careers with our passions, and pave the way for a more fulfilling and prosperous future—for ourselves and generations to come.

For more insights on how to lean into the changing face of leadership, consider the benefits of adopting the

[5 Leadership Anchors™](#) as a framework to evaluate and re-prioritize what is important to you, your team, and the business you are leading.

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¹ Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott (2016) *The 100-Year Life : Living and working in an age of longevity* Bloomsbury Information Ltd, London, <https://www.100yearlife.com/>; Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott (2020) *The New Long Life: A Framework for Flourishing in a Changing World*, Bloomsbury Information Ltd, London, <https://thenewlonglife.com/>.

² <https://www.london.edu/think/welcome-to-the-multi-stage-life>

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics (18 March 2021), [Changing female employment over time](#), ABS Website, accessed 28 August 2023.