**SECRETS OF SUCCESS**

**Report for the Clore Leadership Programme**

Kathleen Soriano, February 2023

How do older female workers, previously in leadership positions within museums, libraries and galleries, approach building a career post institutional life?

What sustains them and supports their success, and what led them to make the change in the first place?

After more than 35 years of working within large-scale, visual arts organisations, many of those in senior leadership positions, I set up my own business in April 2014. With no previous experience of working for myself I established a Limited Company and a thriving arts advisory business, as well as running a successful career as an arts broadcaster alongside. In so doing I have found that others are keen to know what the secrets are to building a successful independent life away from the museums and galleries that have so ‘protected’ us over the last decades.

In the early 2000s several senior leaders in the cultural sector, many of whom were women, stepped away from their full-time employment, however many of them had no intention of calling an end to their time of being useful to the profession. Quite possibly the first or second generation of professional women who have ‘retired’ yet continue to work, this shift in attitude and interest in continuing to be useful, usually for financial recompense, required further study.

A 2021 Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) report recorded that almost one third of the creative industries workforce is made up of the self-employed, double the rate across the UK more broadly. Furthermore, as the Office of National Statistics (ONS) reports currently show, older generations of female workers have been leaving the workforce and their organisations in dramatic numbers. Alongside this, statistics tell us that 50% of the working population will be over 50 from 2030, by which time under 60% of the population will be of working age.

It is no surprise therefore that Jeremy Hunt, Chancellor of the Exchequer, chose to announce a series of incentives planned to encourage older people back into the workplace on 27 January 2023. However, his observation that this particular demographic is currently on the golf course would be shown to be inaccurate in relation to the group taking part in this study.

This report takes the form of an intuitive enquiry and considers a group of female individuals from the creative sector who are part of that current exodus from the workplace, looking to understand their motivations for departure as well as their current activities. They have all developed deep institutional expertise and knowledge across a range of functions over their time as leaders in full-time employment (ranging from 20-45 years). All have stepped away from their organisations with the intention of continuing to work in, or be useful to, their sector in some form or other. Qualifying characteristics included having been Director of a cultural organisation, or Director of departments within an organisation, and Executive Team member; being over 40 years of age with a minimum of 20 years’ experience in the sector; working independently for a minimum of 1 year at the time of the interview; and female.

The study around extended working lives is a recent development that has grown in significance, even since this report began. While this study endeavours to identify a pathway or range of pathways for others who will want or need to take this route in future, as well as examining motivations and drivers for such change, the models are not yet there to test this group against or to place them within. Hopefully the information gleaned through this series of discussions that form the basis of this report will contribute to thinking around this issue.

As Chris Phillipson, Professor Sociology & Social Gerontology, Manchester Institute for Collaborative Research on Ageing, University of Manchester, pointed out in his 2018 study -

‘Research on older workers and retirement has yet to adjust fully to an environment influenced by a combination of demographic change, technological developments and economic recession. A key dimension to the changing relationship between ageing and work is the tension between policies to extend working life and the increasingly fragmented nature of late working life, with the emergence of varied transitions, including: bridge employment, second/third careers, part-time working, early retirement and other variations.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

In his report he commented on the view that ‘retirement had become a “lost” institution’ given the raising of pension age, going on to suggest that it might be argued that ‘retirement rather than being “lost” was “evolving” in new and distinctive ways’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In her TED talk, the octogenarian actor and activist Jane Fonda not only tells us that older women are the largest demographic in the world but argues that rather than seeing the journey of life as an arc that rises in mid-life then ‘slumps into decay’, that we should see it as an ascending staircase with the gaining of ‘experience, wisdom, wholeness and authenticity.’ She goes on to argue that women in this third act, as she refers to it, get better, happier.[[3]](#footnote-3) The 17 women interviewed for this study were certainly more content in their independent roles - in control of their own destinies, earning, and finding enough interest and learning in their projects to sustain them.

As a growing field of study, behavioural or business model comparisons might be hard to draw out, but what is apparent is that the individuals considered in this report have developed a way of working that comes immediately out of their institutional experience and for all but a few, their independent lives see them offer up those skills and expertise in which they have confidence, with only a small number building businesses in new fields and with diversified income streams.

1. *Fuller’ or ‘extended’ working lives? Critical perspectives on changing transitions from work to retirement* by Chris Phillipson, published online Cambridge University Press, 2018, p1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.ted.com/talks/jane_fonda_life_s_third_act?language=en> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)