

**BRAVE
STARTS**

A RESEARCH-LED FRAMEWORK FOR

Career Conversations

at Any stage

**Using Work-Orientation
Archetypes to Support
Inclusive Career Dialogue**

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STARTS**



Why this framework exists

Many organisations struggle to hold meaningful career conversations that:

- work **across ages and career stages**
- don't default to **promotion as the only positive outcome**
- avoid raising **age** directly, while still addressing real differences in motivation, energy, and intent

The result is often silence, assumption, or misalignment.

This framework offers a **neutral, evidence-based way** for managers and individuals to talk about where someone **feels they are right now** in relation to work without reference to age.

The Core Insight

Research across career psychology, lifespan development, and retirement studies consistently shows that people differ in their **current orientation to work**.

These orientations are:

- legitimate
- non-hierarchical
- changeable over time
- **not determined by age**

Brave Starts member data demonstrates that these orientations are also **highly visible in real workforce populations**, particularly in midlife.

The Four Work-Orientation Archetypes

Important: These are **states**, not types.

People can move between them at different points in their lives — sometimes more than once.

1. Advancement-Oriented

How this shows up in conversation

- "I'm ready for what's next."
- "I want to stretch myself."
- "I'm looking for growth or progression."

What success looks like

- Momentum, development, challenge
- Often (but not always) upward movement

Research foundations

- Aligns with **Edgar Schein's** managerial competence and pure challenge career anchors, where motivation centres on advancement and growth.

Managerial implication

- Offer challenge, visibility, and development — but don't assume this is what everyone wants.



2. Stability-Oriented

How this shows up in conversation

- "I'm OK where I am."
- "I like what I do."
- "I don't want to move — I want to do this well."

What success looks like

- Mastery, reliability, continuity
- Being valued without being pushed

Research foundations

- Closely aligned with Schein's security/stability and lifestyle anchors.
- Well-supported by job embeddedness research showing that people who "stay put" are often high performers with strong organisational fit.

Managerial implication

- Stability is **not stagnation**.
- This orientation requires respect, not "activation".



3. Recalibration-Oriented

How this shows up in conversation

- "I want to keep working, but not like this."
- "The pace or pressure isn't sustainable."
- "I want to reshape my role."

What success looks like

- Sustainable contribution
- Different shape, scope, or intensity of work

Research foundations

- Strongly supported by **Donald Super's** lifespan theory, which identifies later-career shifts from growth to maintenance.
- Reinforced by extensive evidence on phased careers and bridge employment.

Managerial implication

- This is a **retention opportunity**.
- Without space to recalibrate, people often exit earlier than they want to.



4. Transition-Oriented

How this shows up in conversation

- "I'm thinking about what comes after this."
- "I want to plan my exit properly."
- "I still have something to offer, but not forever."

What success looks like

- A dignified, well-planned transition
- Clarity, control, and closure

Research foundations

- **Robert Atchley** describes retirement as a staged psychological process, with planning as a critical phase.
- **Laura Carstensen's** Socioemotional Selectivity Theory explains shifts toward meaning, selectivity, and time sovereignty.

Managerial implication

- Transition-orientation is **not disengagement**.
- When supported, it enables knowledge transfer, mentoring, and smoother succession.



What Brave Starts Member Data Shows

Analysis of Brave Starts member responses (N=388) indicates that people naturally distribute across these orientations:

- **Advancement-Oriented:** ~5%
- **Stability-Oriented:** ~10%
- **Recalibration-Oriented:** ~35%
- **Transition-Oriented:** ~50%

Crucially:

These proportions reflect the **Brave Starts audience**, which skews midlife and later career. They should not be treated as population norms — but they do demonstrate that multiple orientations coexist at the same time within a workforce.

How Organisations Can Use This Framework

A simple, age-neutral opening question

“When you think about work right now, which of these feels closest to where you are?”

This:

- avoids age entirely
- legitimises different answers
- reduces defensiveness
- creates psychological safety



Follow-up prompts

- "What would support you best in this phase?"
- "What would make this sustainable?"
- "What would 'success' look like over the next year?"

Why this matters

Most career systems implicitly assume **everyone should be advancement-oriented**.

This framework:

- makes other orientations visible and valid
- reduces misinterpretation (e.g. stability ≠ disengagement)
- supports better retention, planning, and wellbeing
- allows organisations to talk about transition without talking about age

Final thought

Career conversations fail when we talk about age instead of orientation.

This framework gives organisations a shared language to talk about work, contribution, and future direction — **at any time, with anyone**.

