

# The Third Act: Who's responsible?

Advances in human longevity have been described as the greatest social achievement of the past 100 years. The facts are these; we are now living 25-30 years longer than our great grandparents, the equivalent of a whole new adult lifetime. What was old age for them is now middle age for us. This suggests that society, and not any one organisation or individual, is responsible. If we invert the word responsible however, we can ask a different question. Instead of who is responsible, we can also ask, who has the ability-to-respond? Now we can see that not only has society the ability to respond but organisations and individuals as well.

It is self-evident that each one of us is an individual, that we are impacted, directly or indirectly by organisations, and that as organisations and individuals we are enmeshed in the social systems and cultural norms of the society of which we are part. Each is therefore inter-dependent; individuals on organisations, and organisations and individuals on society and vice versa. So it is common sense that when a big change affects all of society, such as human longevity, then society, as well as the organisations and individuals within it, have a responsibility, and in this case also the ability, to respond. So how are we getting on?

## Society

How are our **social systems** and **cultural attitudes** responding to this change in human longevity? There are pockets of change and some societies are doing better than others. For instance in one measure, Sweden tops the poll for the most older people actively engaged in the economy. Overall though little has changed. We seem to be adding these additional 25-30 years without giving it much thought. This is reflected in how little the retirement and pension ages have changed, despite big changes in longevity. This in turn suggests that society is not yet willing to consider

that we could have a Third Act in our lives as opposed to a third age. Because if society did believe that we could have a Third Act lasting 25-30 years, it would not only have to do something about it, it would want to do something about it. Very quickly we could address the pensions crisis as many older people would now be working in some capacity. This would not only improve their physical and mental health and wellbeing but also positively contribute to the economy. Our cultural attitudes to longevity are equally slow to change as reflected in the language we use. Language re-presents meaning, which in turn drives behaviour. Currently we are using lots of bad language which it turn leads to lots of bad and unconscious behaviour. For instance, we still talk about age and retirement when many people coming up to traditional retirement age are neither old nor ready to retire. Change yes and a desire for more time, flexibility and balance in their lives. But also to remain involved and to feel relevant. Few welcome the cliff edge of retirement without preparation. As a result society scores poorly on this measure as it fails to provide any transitional structures or transformative language, either in it's social systems or cultural attitudes. Starting to talk about having a new Third Act in our lives would help to confront this.

### Organisations

How are **organisations** responding to this change in human longevity? Organisations are not doing any better than society at large. For many organisations, once the 60 year age horizon comes into view, the drive to retire people begins in earnest. Assuming their employees are checking out (retiring), they feel no further responsibility to support them. Few are interested in looking at what the word retirement actually means and whether it is an appropriate description of what lies ahead, because if they did, they too might have to act differently. Retirement comes from the French verb *retirer*, which means to withdraw to a place of safety and seclusion, not a great place to spend 25-30 years of active life. Many organisations do offer 'retirement courses' but these are preparing people for a world that no longer exists. Given our new reality and the imperative to transition, people need time and the support to figure this out. *'What is it that you want to do and be in this*

*new Third Act of your life'* is a big question. This absence of organisational structures to support people in transition suggests two things; *firstly*, that organisations are abrogating their responsibilities to their employees and are enabled to do this by *failing* to upgrade their thinking on longevity and retirement. *Secondly*, we clearly need new, more flexible and more inclusive organisational designs, not only to make it more attractive to Third Actors who want to stay on or to come back, but also to others at different ages and stages as well.

### Individuals

How are **individuals** responding to this change in human longevity? In the absence of any social structures or organisational supports, individuals are left to transition to The Third Act on their own, and that is very hard to do. Recall how in the transition from the first to second act earlier in life we shifted our internal centre-of-gravity from a Dependent to Independent level of consciousness. Looking back we can now see that there was never going to be a second act without this underlying shift. We had to leave the dependency of our first act in order to become Independent adults in the second act and there was plenty of support to do it. The personal motivation was clearly there, as were the family, social and organisational supports. Everyone seemed to have a stake in our development; our hormones were pulling us, our parents were pushing us, society was willing to educate us and organisations to train us. Compare that to what happens at the end of the second act where you are left on your own. Society and the organisations we work for have no expectation that we are going to have a Third Act and so offer no support in finding it. Our family and friendship networks are often as confused. Operating under the same social systems and used to the same language, they are not sure how to respond. Platitudes are the order of the day. So who or what is going to motivate you to transition into The Third Act? The wake up call comes as an invitation to turn inwards and seek a new meaning and purpose to underpin this new Third Act in your life. You know what you were, the roles you performed, but who or what are you now? Accepting the call is also a recognition that your transition starts from the inside out and that just as there was no second act without a shift in your underlying consciousness from



Dependence to Independence, that there will be no Third Act without a shift from Independence to Inter-Independence. Perhaps this is also why we are living so much longer as we only begin to experience our true nature as interconnected beings at the Inter Independent level. It is this sense of Inter-Independence that gives meaning and purpose to The Third Act.

So what do we do?

The Third Act organisation has a dual purpose, to both educate society and organisations about the impact of human longevity as well as to support individuals as they make this inside-out transition. We educate through conferences and seminars and support individuals in transition through Third Act Transition Programmes and one to one coaching. We are also creating a Third Act Talent Pool website where Third Actors can build a new Third Act Profile. This database will then be promoted to organisations who are interested in hiring experienced Third Actors on a new and very different Third Act employment contract. More to follow....

***Dr. Edward J Kelly***

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## Questions for society, organisations and individuals:

“The fact of life have changed”

### Society

What changes could be made in our social systems that would encourage us to actively develop a Third Act in life rather than passively live out a third age? And what changes in language might be necessary? Could we for instance move the focus from age and retirement to opportunity and transition and what impact would that have on us socially?

### Organisations

What responsibilities do organisations have to their employees, now that they know that their employees are no longer retiring but rather transitioning into a whole new Third Act? Do organisations need to adopt new organisational designs that are more flexible, more inclusive and more human centered, and not just so that Third Actors can stay on or come back, but to also to support other employees at earlier ages and stages as well?

### Individuals

And what responsibilities do individuals have for their own transition to The Third Act? After all, longevity is having the most immediate and personal impact on individuals. If individuals are to have a Third Act, what sort of shift in their underlying consciousness is required? What old questions need to be revisited, what new ones need to be considered? And what support is required to assist people as they address, what will I do and be in this new Third Act of my life?

**PS. If you are interested in exploring more about how human longevity is impacting our lives socially, organisationally and personally and or you are interested in your own transition to this new Third Act in your life, come to our conference in The Marker Hotel Dublin on the 9<sup>th</sup> November 2017. You can reserve a ticket here [www.thethirdactconference.com](http://www.thethirdactconference.com)**