Staying Relevant or Becoming Invisible? Human Legitimacy in Extended Working Lives

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Abstract: Demographic ageing, artificial intelligence and increasingly fragmented careers are reshaping not only the duration of working lives but also how individuals are recognised as organisational actors. This conceptual theory-building paper introduces human legitimacy at work, defined as the degree to which an individual is regarded as a meaningful, capable and future-relevant organisational actor. Drawing on legitimacy and recognition theory, socioemotional selectivity theory, psychological safety, individual ambidexterity, professional identity and meaningful work, the framework proposes that human legitimacy emerges through the alignment of adaptive capacity, social recognition and identity continuity. It further develops a typology of legitimacy misalignment comprising the Invisible Expert, the Over-Signalled Contributor and the Identity-Disrupted Actor. The paper argues that extended working lives should be understood not only as a challenge of employability or retention, but also of sustained recognition and future relevance. It consequently introduces legitimacy stewardship as a leadership responsibility for aligning capability renewal, recognition systems and identity support in contexts of demographic and technological change.

Keywords: Human legitimacy, Extended working lives, Social recognition, Identity continuity, Psychological safety, Future-oriented legitimacy, Leadership

1. Introduction

Contemporary organisations operate in environments characterised by demographic ageing, technological disruption and increasingly fragmented careers. As Kanter (2013) argues, organisational value increasingly depends on the capacity to recognise and respond to change rather than simply reproduce existing knowledge. At the same time, longer working lives and advances in artificial intelligence are reshaping expectations concerning competence, adaptability and future contribution (Lysova et al., 2023). Careers are also becoming less linear, requiring repeated transitions and professional reinvention (Ibarra et al., 2026).

These developments create a particular challenge for experienced workers. Research shows that they contribute expertise, organisational memory and relational capital (Ng and Feldman, 2012; Truxillo et al., 2015), yet age remains a salient social category through which assumptions about adaptability, innovation and future potential are formed (Posthuma and Campion, 2009; Boni-Saenz, 2026). Individuals may therefore remain capable and productive while becoming less visible in development opportunities, strategic initiatives or organisational narratives about the future. Continued participation does not necessarily imply continued recognition.

Existing perspectives explain important aspects of this problem. Human capital theory emphasises accumulated knowledge and skills (Becker, 1964), employability research highlights adaptability and career agency (Fugate et al., 2004), and sustainable career research addresses the long-term relationship between performance, health and meaning (De Vos et al., 2020). However, these approaches provide less insight into the relational processes through which individuals continue to be regarded as credible and future-relevant organisational contributors.

This paper addresses this gap by introducing human legitimacy at work, defined as the degree to which an individual is regarded as a meaningful, capable and future-relevant organisational actor. The concept shifts attention from employability to recognition and from retention to relevance.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it conceptualises human legitimacy as distinct from employability, performance and inclusion. Second, it develops a framework in which human legitimacy emerges through the alignment of adaptive capacity, social recognition and identity continuity. Third, it introduces legitimacy misalignment to explain why individuals may remain capable and formally included while nevertheless losing organisational relevance.

2. Conceptual Methodological Approach

This paper adopts a conceptual theory-building approach to examine how individuals remain recognised as legitimate and future-relevant organisational actors across extended working lives. The literature base was purposive and theory-driven rather than systematic or protocol-based. Foundational contributions were

retained where they define core constructs, while more recent scholarship was incorporated to capture developments in extended careers, psychological safety, meaningful work, demographic ageing and technological change. Sources were selected for their relevance to three analytical questions: how capability is renewed over time, how contribution becomes socially recognised, and how professional identity is maintained through change.

The framework integrates complementary theoretical domains. Legitimacy and recognition theories provide the relational basis for understanding organisational value as socially conferred; individual ambidexterity and learning inform adaptive capacity; and professional identity and identity-work perspectives inform identity continuity. Socioemotional selectivity theory adds a life-course perspective on changing motivations and forms of contribution, while psychological safety helps explain the organisational conditions under which learning and experimentation can become visible without undermining professional credibility.

Analytically, adaptive capacity, social recognition and identity continuity are treated as distinct but interdependent conditions of human legitimacy. The framework therefore focuses on their alignment rather than on their independent effects. The misalignment typology was developed by considering theoretically meaningful configurations in which one dimension becomes weakened or disproportionate relative to the others. This reasoning yields the Invisible Expert, the Over-Signalled Contributor and the Identity-Disrupted Actor. These configurations are proposed as analytical types rather than empirically validated categories and provide a basis for future empirical testing.

3. Why Capability is no Longer Enough

Human capital, employability and sustainable career perspectives have substantially advanced understanding of how individuals remain productive across longer working lives (Becker, 1964; Fugate et al., 2004; De Vos et al., 2020). However, capability does not automatically translate into organisational relevance, because value is also shaped through processes of evaluation, recognition and social judgement (Honneth, 1995; Lamont, 2012; Fraser, 2008).

This distinction is particularly important in ageing workplaces. Experienced workers may retain expertise and commitment while being perceived as less adaptable, innovative or future-oriented (Posthuma and Campion, 2009; Ng and Feldman, 2012), potentially limiting their access to development opportunities, strategic projects and organisational influence.

Socioemotional Selectivity Theory further suggests that changing time horizons may shift priorities towards emotionally meaningful goals, generativity and relationships (Carstensen, 2021; Carstensen and Reynolds, 2023). Such changes should not automatically be interpreted as declining adaptability; rather, they may represent alternative forms of contribution that organisational systems fail to recognise.

Understanding extended working lives therefore requires consideration not only of what individuals can contribute, but also of how that contribution is recognised and how change is incorporated into professional identity. These concerns provide the conceptual basis for human legitimacy.

4. Human Legitimacy at Work

Building on Suchman's (1995) view of legitimacy as a socially constructed judgement of appropriateness and worth, this paper extends the concept to the individual level. Although legitimacy research has traditionally focused on organisations and institutions (Suchman, 1995; Deephouse and Suchman, 2008), increasingly fragmented and uncertain careers make individual legitimacy particularly relevant. Individuals may remain employed and capable while no longer being regarded as central to an organisation's future.

Human legitimacy at work is defined here as the degree to which an individual is regarded as a meaningful, capable and future-relevant organisational actor. It is conceptually distinct from employability, inclusion and professional reputation. Employability concerns the capacity to obtain or sustain work; inclusion concerns access and participation; and reputation reflects accumulated evaluations of an individual's standing. Human legitimacy instead captures whether an individual's contribution is recognised as credible, meaningful and relevant to the organisation's future.

Three characteristics distinguish the construct. First, human legitimacy is relational: it is socially conferred, negotiated and potentially withdrawn rather than possessed by the individual alone. Second, it is evaluative: legitimacy depends not only on what an individual can do, but also on whether that contribution is regarded as valuable and worthy of influence. Third, it is future-oriented: accumulated expertise and past performance

matter, but organisational actors are also evaluated in terms of their perceived capacity to continue contributing under changing conditions.

Figure 1 presents human legitimacy as an emergent condition arising from the alignment of adaptive capacity, social recognition and identity continuity. Adaptive capacity concerns the ability to renew and deploy capability as conditions change; social recognition concerns whether that contribution is acknowledged and incorporated into organisational life; and identity continuity concerns whether individuals can integrate change into a coherent professional sense of self.

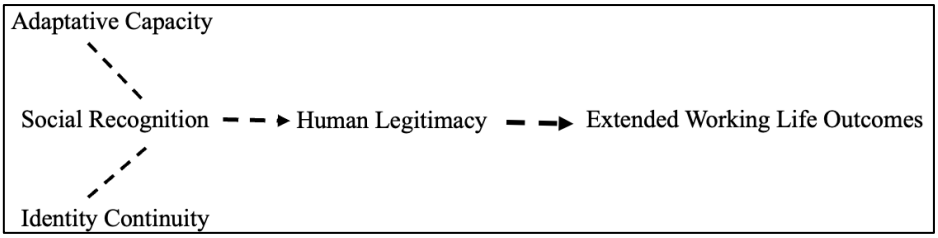


Figure 1: Conceptual model of human legitimacy in extended working lives

Recognition theory reinforces the relational nature of the framework. Honneth (1995) positions recognition as central to identity and self-realisation, while Fraser (2008) emphasises parity of participation. Applied to organisational settings, these perspectives suggest that formal inclusion is insufficient when individuals are not recognised as actors whose knowledge, voice and future contribution matter.

Research on meaningful work further supports this argument. As technological change, automation and flexible work arrangements alter the content and organisation of work, autonomy, belonging, contribution and meaning become increasingly salient (Lysova et al., 2023). Human legitimacy therefore connects capability, recognition and identity, helping to explain why employability alone may be insufficient to sustain organisational relevance across extended working lives.

5. Three Dimensions of Human Legitimacy

Human legitimacy is conceptualised as emerging from the alignment of three analytically distinct but interdependent dimensions: adaptive capacity, social recognition and identity continuity. None is sufficient in isolation. Individuals may remain highly capable but receive little recognition, may retain recognition that is no longer aligned with renewed capability, or may remain capable and recognised while experiencing disruption in their professional sense of self. The framework therefore focuses not only on the presence of each dimension, but on the quality of their alignment over time.

5.1 Adaptive Capacity

Adaptive capacity refers to an individual's ability to sustain meaningful contribution under changing conditions by renewing, extending and redeploying existing capabilities. It encompasses learning orientation, motivation and the capacity to combine established expertise with the exploration of new knowledge, technologies and work practices.

This tension parallels March's (1991) distinction between exploitation and exploration. Across extended working lives, continued relevance is unlikely to depend exclusively on either accumulated expertise or constant novelty. Rather, individuals need to draw on what they already know while remaining able to experiment, learn and adapt. Research on individual ambidexterity similarly suggests that sustained contribution depends on combining exploitation and exploration rather than privileging one at the expense of the other (Mom et al., 2009; Dieguez, 2026). A growth-mindset perspective further suggests that beliefs about the developability of capabilities influence responses to challenge and opportunities for learning (Dweck and Yeager, 2019).

Adaptive capacity, however, should not be treated as exclusively an individual responsibility. Learning does not necessarily translate into renewed organisational relevance unless individuals can apply, demonstrate and receive recognition for newly developed capabilities. Access to developmental assignments and opportunities for experimentation therefore influences whether adaptation becomes visible and organisationally meaningful. From a human-legitimacy perspective, adaptive capacity is both an individual achievement and an organisationally enabled process.

5.2 Social Recognition

Social recognition refers to the extent to which an individual is regarded as a valuable, credible and future-relevant contributor within the organisation. It concerns not only whether capability exists, but whether that capability is noticed, trusted and incorporated into organisational decision-making, development opportunities and future-oriented roles.

Recognition is inherently relational. Honneth (1995) identifies recognition as a condition for identity development and participation, while Fraser (2008) emphasises parity of participation. Applied to organisational settings, these perspectives suggest that legitimacy depends not only on what individuals can contribute, but also on whether organisational structures enable them to be heard, influence decisions and participate on meaningful terms.

Social recognition has both interpersonal and structural dimensions. Organisational perceptions are shaped not only by individual attributes, but also by access to opportunity structures, influential networks and developmental assignments. Kanter's (1987) work is particularly relevant here, as behaviours attributed to personal characteristics may instead reflect unequal access to organisational opportunities. Apparent passivity, resistance or disengagement may therefore arise not from an absence of capability, but from exclusion from contexts in which capability can be demonstrated and renewed.

Psychological safety is particularly important because adaptation requires individuals to make learning visible. Asking questions, seeking feedback, acknowledging uncertainty and experimenting involve interpersonal risk (Edmondson, 1999). In psychologically safe environments, these behaviours can be interpreted as signs of learning and future-oriented capability rather than weakness or declining competence (Edmondson and Bransby, 2023). This is especially relevant for experienced or high-status workers, for whom admitting uncertainty may threaten established professional credibility.

From a human-legitimacy perspective, social recognition is therefore the process through which capability becomes organisationally meaningful. Adaptive capacity may exist without being visible, valued or translated into influence. Human legitimacy requires both the capacity to adapt and organisational conditions that allow renewed capability to be recognised as relevant to the organisation's future.

5.3 Identity Continuity

Identity continuity refers to the capacity to maintain a coherent professional sense of self as roles, expectations and career conditions change. Professional identity is not static, but continuously constructed through identity work, particularly during periods of transition and role change (Pratt et al., 2006; Lepisto et al., 2015).

Career transitions therefore involve more than acquiring new skills. Individuals must also reinterpret how previous experience connects with emerging professional roles. Organisational contexts shape this process by influencing which identities and forms of contribution are perceived as legitimate or desirable (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Identity continuity is thus partly enabled or constrained by the roles, narratives and opportunities available within organisations.

This issue becomes especially salient across extended working lives, where technological change and repeated transitions may challenge established understandings of expertise and professional value. As careers increasingly involve experimentation and reinvention (Ibarra et al., 2026), individuals may remain capable and recognised while struggling to integrate change into a coherent narrative of who they are becoming.

Identity continuity does not imply identity stability. Rather, it requires sufficient narrative coherence to connect past experience, present adaptation and future possibility. Mentoring, role redesign and reflective career conversations can support this process. Meaningful work may also reinforce identity when individuals perceive their contribution as purposeful and valued (Lysova et al., 2023), but meaning should not substitute for recognition, opportunity or fair organisational support (Tosti-Kharas, Dobrow and Kappes, 2024).

5.4 Future-oriented Legitimacy

A central proposition of this framework is that human legitimacy is increasingly future-oriented. In relatively stable organisational settings, legitimacy could rely heavily on accumulated expertise, tenure and demonstrated performance. In contemporary workplaces characterised by technological change, digitalisation and career uncertainty, however, individuals are increasingly evaluated not only by what they have contributed, but also by whether they are perceived as capable of contributing under changing conditions.

Future-oriented legitimacy therefore links past contribution, present recognition and anticipated future value. Individuals may remain productive, experienced and committed while becoming progressively disconnected from organisational narratives of innovation, development or future opportunity. In such cases, the issue is not necessarily declining capability, but a weakening perception that the individual belongs to the organisation's future.

This temporal dimension helps explain why human legitimacy cannot be reduced to current performance or formal participation. Sustaining legitimacy requires conditions in which individuals can continue to see themselves, and be seen by others, as credible participants in an evolving organisational future.

6. Legitimacy Alignment and Misalignment

Human legitimacy is strongest when adaptive capacity, social recognition and identity continuity mutually reinforce one another. Alignment occurs when individuals are able to renew and apply their capabilities, have those contributions recognised as valuable and future-relevant, and integrate ongoing change into a coherent professional identity.

Misalignment occurs when one dimension becomes weakened or disproportionate relative to the others. Importantly, diminished legitimacy does not necessarily imply poor performance, lack of employability or formal exclusion. Individuals may remain productive and organisationally included while experiencing reduced visibility, declining influence, identity disruption or uncertainty about their future relevance.

Legitimacy misalignment therefore helps explain forms of vulnerability that capability-based approaches may overlook. It shifts attention from whether individuals remain in work to whether capability, recognition and professional identity remain sufficiently aligned for them to participate as legitimate and future-relevant organisational actors.

Table 1 presents three analytically distinct configurations of legitimacy misalignment. These are not intended as exhaustive or empirically fixed categories, but as theoretical types illustrating how different forms of imbalance may produce distinct organisational and individual consequences.

Table 1: Forms of legitimacy misalignment in extended working lives

Type	Core misalignment	Organisational manifestation	Human consequence	Leadership response
Invisible Expert	Strong adaptive capacity, low recognition	Expertise is used but insufficiently valued strategically; exclusion from innovation, development or future-oriented opportunities	Frustration, disengagement and loss of voice	Make expertise and renewed capability visible; reconsider evaluation criteria; create intergenerational knowledge and innovation roles
Over-Signalled Contributor	Strong recognition, weakened capability renewal	Reputation or status masks emerging learning gaps; established credibility reduces visible renewal or experimentation	Anxiety, defensiveness and role strain	Normalise learning among high-status actors; provide psychologically safe reskilling opportunities; recognise experimentation and renewal
Identity-Disrupted Actor	Capacity and recognition remain present, identity continuity is weakened	The individual remains valuable but struggles to integrate changing roles into a coherent professional identity	Loss of meaning, emotional exhaustion and withdrawal intentions	Support identity work through mentoring, reflective career conversations and role redesign

Source: Own elaboration

6.1 The Invisible Expert

The Invisible Expert combines strong adaptive capacity with insufficient social recognition. This configuration may arise when organisational narratives privilege novelty over experience or when age-related assumptions associate established expertise with rigidity rather than adaptability. Individuals may continue to contribute valuable knowledge, judgement and organisational memory while being overlooked for strategic projects, innovation initiatives or development opportunities.

The central problem is therefore not lack of capability, but failure to recognise that capability as relevant to the organisation's future. Over time, this disconnect may reduce voice, motivation and knowledge sharing while depriving the organisation of expertise that remains valuable but insufficiently visible. The Invisible Expert thus illustrates a central proposition of the framework: capability alone does not generate human legitimacy; contribution must also be recognised as future-relevant.

6.2 The Over-signalled Contributor

The Over-Signalled Contributor represents a different form of misalignment: social recognition remains strong while capability renewal becomes increasingly fragile. Established reputation, status or past achievement may sustain organisational credibility even when learning, experimentation or adaptation have slowed.

The risk is not necessarily incompetence, but a growing separation between recognised status and current capability development. Strong reputational capital may make it more difficult to acknowledge uncertainty or engage visibly in learning when doing so is perceived as threatening professional standing. Individuals may therefore begin to protect an established image of competence rather than openly renew it.

Human legitimacy requires recognition to remain connected to ongoing adaptation rather than relying exclusively on historical achievement. Leadership should therefore make learning legitimate for high-status actors by creating psychologically safe opportunities for reskilling, experimentation and capability renewal.

6.3 The Identity-disrupted Actor

The Identity-Disrupted Actor remains capable and socially recognised but experiences weakened identity continuity. This configuration may emerge during major career transitions, role redesign, technological disruption or later-career reorientation, particularly when established understandings of expertise and professional value are challenged.

Unlike the Invisible Expert, the central problem is not insufficient recognition. Unlike the Over-Signalled Contributor, it is not primarily a gap in capability renewal. Rather, individuals may continue to perform valued roles while struggling to connect past experience, present contribution and future possibility within a coherent professional narrative.

This configuration highlights the internal dimension of human legitimacy. Legitimacy must be socially conferred, but it must also remain personally inhabitable. Individuals may be recognised by others as valuable while becoming increasingly uncertain about who they are becoming professionally. Mentoring, reflective career conversations and role redesign can therefore support legitimacy by helping individuals integrate change into a credible sense of professional continuity.

7. Leadership as Legitimacy Stewardship

The framework positions legitimacy stewardship as a leadership responsibility for sustaining the conditions under which individuals remain visible, valued and future-relevant organisational contributors. Leaders do not confer legitimacy unilaterally; rather, they shape the social, developmental and symbolic conditions through which capability is recognised, professional identities are supported and future contribution becomes credible. This perspective is consistent with relational leadership theory, which views leadership as a social process through which meaning, identities and organisational realities are co-constructed (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Three practical areas of legitimacy stewardship follow from the framework.

First, capability stewardship requires meaningful opportunities for continued learning, experimentation and capability renewal across career stages. Access to reskilling, innovation projects and developmental assignments should not be constrained by assumptions about age, seniority or career stage. Learning opportunities must also be connected to opportunities to apply and demonstrate renewed capability; otherwise, reskilling may be encouraged without becoming organisationally relevant.

Second, recognition stewardship requires leaders and HR professionals to examine how organisational systems define and signal future value. Performance and talent processes should recognise not only visible achievement, but also learning, adaptability, knowledge transfer and intergenerational contribution. Leaders should also challenge age-based assumptions that equate experience with resistance to change or novelty with greater future potential.

Third, identity stewardship involves supporting individuals as they reinterpret professional value across transitions. Mentoring, intergenerational collaboration, role redesign and reflective career conversations can

help connect previous expertise with emerging forms of contribution, particularly when technological change alters tasks or forms of expertise that have been central to professional identity.

Psychological safety cuts across all three forms of stewardship. Individuals need to be able to acknowledge uncertainty, seek feedback and experiment without fearing that visible learning will undermine established credibility (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson and Bransby, 2023). This is especially important for experienced or high-status workers, for whom admitting a learning need may carry greater reputational risk.

Leadership in extended working lives therefore involves more than performance management or retention. Legitimacy stewardship requires aligning opportunities for capability renewal, systems of recognition and support for identity continuity so that individuals can remain credible contributors to the organisation's future.

8. Discussion

This paper addresses why individuals may remain capable and productive yet become progressively less relevant within organisational futures. Human legitimacy shifts attention from whether individuals can continue working to whether they remain recognised as meaningful, credible and future-relevant organisational actors.

The first contribution is to distinguish human legitimacy from capability-based perspectives such as employability. Human capital, employability and sustainable career approaches explain individuals' capacity to remain productive, but provide less insight into why capability may fail to translate into organisational relevance. Human legitimacy addresses this gap by positioning recognition as a relational process through which capability becomes socially valued.

Second, the framework conceptualises human legitimacy as the alignment of adaptive capacity, social recognition and identity continuity. Its contribution lies in their interdependence: capability without recognition may remain invisible; recognition without capability renewal may become disconnected from current contribution; and capability and recognition may coexist with disruption in professional identity.

Third, the misalignment typology identifies distinct mechanisms through which legitimacy may weaken. The Invisible Expert reflects insufficient recognition; the Over-Signalled Contributor, a growing disconnect between recognition and capability renewal; and the Identity-Disrupted Actor, weakened professional coherence despite continued capability and recognition. These configurations suggest that similar outcomes may arise through different mechanisms and therefore require different organisational responses.

Fourth, the framework highlights the temporal nature of legitimacy. Organisational relevance depends not only on past contribution, but also on anticipated future value. Human legitimacy therefore connects past contribution, present recognition and perceived future potential.

Finally, legitimacy stewardship extends these insights to leadership. By shaping opportunities for learning, systems of recognition and support for professional transitions, leaders influence whether individuals remain credible participants in the organisation's future. Extended working lives should therefore be understood not only as a question of continued participation, but also of continued organisational relevance.

9. Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research

This paper proposes human legitimacy as a conceptual lens for understanding extended working lives beyond employability, retention and performance. Human legitimacy emerges when adaptive capacity, social recognition and identity continuity are sufficiently aligned for individuals to remain credible contributors to the organisation's future.

The framework has several limitations. It is conceptual and has not yet been empirically validated, while its dimensions and misalignment configurations may operate differently across occupational, organisational, national and career-stage contexts. Their relative importance may also vary according to the nature and intensity of technological change.

Future research should examine how human legitimacy is created, sustained and disrupted over time. Longitudinal studies could explore changes across career transitions, reskilling and technological disruption, while empirical research should test the distinctiveness and interaction of the three dimensions and the robustness of the proposed misalignment configurations. Leadership practices, age-related stereotypes, AI adoption and organisational opportunity structures also warrant investigation as potential antecedents of perceived future relevance.

Developing and validating measures of human legitimacy represents an important next step. Such research should establish whether the construct provides explanatory value beyond related concepts such as employability, inclusion and professional identity, and clarify its implications for sustainable careers and leadership.

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