

CASE STUDY & TEACHING

Career Dilemmas in Maturity: The Case of Aurora

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SÃO PAULO – SP, BRAZIL*Abstract*

This case tells the story of Aurora Martins' career. As she approached her 60th birthday, Aurora felt fulfilled in her role as a consultant in Human Development. The shift to a more flexible career format allowed her to contemplate changes aimed at achieving a better balance between her professional trajectory and quality of life. Throughout her journey, we observed the transformation of the work dimension in Aurora's life. During her career, she actively sought opportunities to reposition herself as a Human Resources professional, investing in self-development to reach her goals. Even after retiring, Aurora maintained her interest in her professional activities, a behavior that indicates the significance of work in her life. The prospect of relocating to a coastal city—an aspiration for her and her partner—emerges as a potential avenue for enhancing their personal and professional balance. However, moving away from her established network of partners and clients could impact Aurora's career plans.

Keywords: Late career. Lifespan. Career transition. Life and career cycles. Older workers. Work-life balance.

*Dilemas de carreira na maturidade: o caso de Aurora**Resumo*

O caso conta a história de carreira de Aurora Martins. Às vésperas de completar 60 anos, Aurora sentia-se realizada com a sua atuação profissional como consultora na área de Desenvolvimento Humano. O novo formato de carreira, agora com maior flexibilidade, permitia que ela considerasse a possibilidade de avaliar algumas mudanças em busca de maior equilíbrio entre trajetória profissional e qualidade de vida. Ao longo de sua história, podemos observar a transformação da dimensão do trabalho na vida de Aurora. Durante sua trajetória, Aurora busca espaço para se reposicionar como profissional da área de Recursos Humanos, investindo no autodesenvolvimento para alcançar seus objetivos. Mesmo aposentada, manteve interesse nas atividades profissionais e se dedicou a elas, reforçando a importância que a dimensão do trabalho ocupa em sua vida. A possibilidade da mudança para uma cidade litorânea, projeto de vida do casal, surge como alternativa para um melhor equilíbrio entre a vida pessoal e a profissional. Porém, afastar-se de sua rede de parceiros e clientes poderia afetar os planos de carreira de Aurora.

Palavras-chave: Late career. Lifespan. Transição de carreira. Ciclos de vida e carreira. Trabalhadores mais velhos. Equilíbrio Trabalho-Vida.

*Dilemas profesionales en la madurez: el caso de Aurora**Resumen*

El caso cuenta la historia de la carrera de Aurora Martins. A punto de cumplir 60 años, Aurora se sentía realizada en su rol de consultora en Desarrollo Humano. El cambio a un formato de carrera más flexible le permitió contemplar cambios orientados a lograr un mejor equilibrio entre su trayectoria profesional y calidad de vida. A lo largo de su recorrido, observamos la transformación de la dimensión laboral en la vida de Aurora. Durante su carrera, buscó activamente oportunidades para reposicionarse como profesional en Recursos Humanos, invirtiendo en el autodesarrollo para alcanzar sus metas. Incluso después de jubilarse, Aurora mantuvo su interés en las actividades profesionales, lo que subraya la importancia que la dimensión del trabajo tiene en su vida. La perspectiva de mudarse a una ciudad costera, una aspiración para ella y su pareja surge como una posible vía para mejorar un mejor equilibrio entre lo personal y lo profesional. Sin embargo, alejarse de su red establecida de socios y clientes podría afectar los planes de carrera de Aurora.

Palabras clave: Late career. Lifespan. Transición de carrera. Ciclos de vida y carrera. Trabajadores mayores. Equilibrio vida-trabajo.

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INTRODUCTION

It was another sunny day in December 2020. That year, *Aurora Martins* and her husband, *Lucas Prado*, were embarking on a long-planned vacation trip—a road journey through the northeastern coast of Brazil.

Approaching her 60th birthday, Aurora felt accomplished in her professional activities as a consultant in Human Development. Supporting major companies in the development and training of their leadership teams allowed her to engage with projects that were deeply aligned with her personal values. Over the course of her career, Aurora consolidated several career assets—awareness, skills, and competencies within her field—as well as a solid professional network that provided her with frequent invitations for new projects.

Although Aurora recognized her professional achievements, the desire to harmonize work and personal life had gradually become more central in her reflections. She aspired to a more flexible work arrangement—one that would allow her to resume the travels she had always enjoyed with her husband—while still preserving the professional success she had built throughout her career.

Gazing at the sunset over João Pessoa's seashore and listening to the soft melody of a saxophonist nearby, Aurora reclined on her deck chair to think. The moment had come to make an important decision: Should she continue her career in a large metropolis, where professional opportunities were abundant, or prioritize her quality of life, seeking new alternatives for her professional projects and future plans?

THE STORY OF AURORA MARTINS

The eldest of three siblings, *Aurora Martins* spent part of her childhood in the countryside of São Paulo state, where she was enrolled in a private school at the age of seven. Her early school years were filled with discoveries — most notably, a love for reading and a deep admiration for her teachers.

At eleven, Aurora moved with her family to São Paulo's capital due to her father's job transfer. In the city, she continued her education in a public school, where she attended her first English classes. Conversations with classmates who studied at private language schools sparked Aurora's interest, leading her to enroll in an English course herself.

Reflecting on this experience, Aurora recalled: "It was another world. A private school with so many resources—so different from the public school. My classmates arrived with private drivers. Somehow, I realized that learning English could become a turning point in my life."

Her fluency in English soon opened doors to her first professional experience—as a teacher for children at an international school at the age of seventeen. This achievement marked a milestone in her life; her belief in English as a differential skill had proven true. Around the same time, she received an opportunity to participate in a cultural exchange program in the United States. However, her parents disapproved of the idea, frustrating Aurora's plans:

"I had a strong desire to experience life abroad, but that wasn't common among my friends or within my family. I decided I would work, earn my own money, and make that dream exchange trip happen."

As college entrance exams approached, Aurora needed to choose a field of study. At eighteen, she worked as a teacher in a public school, but the experience did not meet her expectations, prompting her to reconsider her plans.

"Teaching helped me understand that it would be a temporary activity, not a long-term career path. I decided to major in Business Administration with a specialization in Tourism. I still dreamed of traveling abroad, and I thought that degree could be my gateway to the world."

During her first two years at university, Aurora attended morning classes and taught English in the afternoon. Her language proficiency opened additional professional opportunities and led to her first corporate position—as a bilingual secretary in a medium-sized company with competitive pay.

The full-time job required Aurora to transfer her classes to the evening shift. During these nighttime classes, she met *Lucas Prado*, a fellow student who would later become her husband.

“I met Lucas in college, and we started dating soon after. He knew about my frustrated dream of going on an exchange to the United States. Early in our relationship, I told him that having an international experience was still one of my goals.”

After graduation, the couple decided to marry. Both had achieved a degree of professional stability: Lucas had passed a public examination to work for Empresa Brasileira de Correios e Telégrafos (the Brazilian Postal Service), and Aurora had been hired as a hotel manager by a major hotel chain—earning a higher salary than before. At twenty-two, in her first managerial position, she supervised a team of more than sixty employees. Aurora viewed this challenge as a defining experience:

“I had no prior leadership experience, and there was no one to guide me. I learned on the job, and I consider that experience a success. It taught me that I truly enjoyed working with people.”

To save money for the long-desired trip to the United States, Aurora and Lucas accepted an unusual arrangement: they lived in a small room inside the hotel where she worked. By saving as much as possible, their dream of an overseas experience gradually became attainable. Finally, at the age of twenty-four, both resigned from their jobs and embarked on their journey to the United States. In Aurora’s words: “We quit our jobs to live that dream. In truth, Lucas boarded my dream.”

THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE PROFESSIONAL TRAJECTORY

The long-awaited experience abroad lasted one year. During this period, Aurora and Lucas attended several courses and visited numerous cities throughout the United States. By the end of that year, they decided to return to Brazil. It was now time to find employment once again. Aurora felt confident about her prospects: “When we came back to Brazil, with my English in great shape, I thought finding a job in the hotel industry would be easy.”

Indeed, Lucas quickly obtained a managerial position in a major hotel chain. Aurora, on the other hand, chose to seek opportunities outside the tourism sector. By then, she had started to consider motherhood, and her previous experiences had shown that certain career paths offered better conditions to balance professional and family roles.

“We returned from the United States with little money and needed jobs quickly. Preparing to become a mother, I decided to send my résumé to bilingual secretary positions. Unlike tourism jobs, these roles had more predictable hours and responsibilities.”

She soon received an offer for a temporary position as a bilingual secretary in a multinational company in the chemical sector. The temporary role became permanent when Aurora was hired as the Executive Secretary to the Compensation Management Department. Thus began a 15-year career in that company, always serving as an executive secretary within the Human Resources division: “When I joined the company, my career vision was tied to the role of executive secretary. Destiny led me to Human Resources, where I discovered my true vocation.”

Her career progression continued uninterrupted, even during maternity. By the age of 31, Aurora was serving as Executive Secretary to the Human Resources Board. The quality of her work built a relationship of trust with her leaders, enabling her to accumulate responsibilities, develop new competencies, and achieve professional satisfaction:

“I loved being an executive secretary. The position had considerable prestige within the company. When the President’s secretary went on vacation, I was the one chosen to replace her. In that role, I had access to strategic discussions and major decisions involving people management.”

However, market pressures and rising competition soon forced organizations to undergo internal restructurings. Layoffs and outsourcing initiatives also reached Aurora's company. Teams were downsized, and remaining employees were expected to take on broader responsibilities—often beyond their original job descriptions. Still in her role as executive secretary, but now deeply knowledgeable about HR operations, Aurora was invited to lead several functional areas, including expatriate management, recruitment and selection, general services, and corporate travel. She also contributed to strategic projects, such as the innovative implementation of a Profit-Sharing and Results Program (PLR) at the time.

In addition to her administrative and strategic tasks, Aurora also acted as an internal training facilitator for the company's leadership. During her tenure, she received several offers to become an executive secretary in other organizations. One particularly attractive proposal came from an American multinational in the technology sector. However, the HR Director persuaded her to stay and support the company through a major internal transformation — a request that weighed heavily on her decision.

It wasn't long before another major organizational shift took place. The company, which had two main business divisions — Agricultural and Chemical — underwent a corporate split. A new company was created to manage the chemical segment, while the agricultural division remained as the original entity. Aurora was faced with a choice: to remain in the original company as an executive secretary or move to the new company as a *Human Resources Leader*.

Aurora applied for and was selected for the new company. At age 42, she assumed the position of HR Coordinator with the challenge of structuring the department from scratch. Within less than a year, she was promoted to HR Manager for South America, reinforcing her conviction that this move represented a natural evolution toward an executive role in Human Resources.

Over time, however, the company's strategic direction shifted, altering its culture and weakening Aurora's sense of organizational alignment:

"The new company started with limited resources and strict cost-cutting measures to become viable as an independent organization. There was no budget for training or team expansion. Most of my job revolved around staff reductions. It became a very financially driven HR department."

As the leader of a resource-constrained area, Aurora found herself responsible for increasingly operational units, such as general services and facilities management: "I was responsible for everything—from toilet paper to employee bonuses," she confessed with a sigh.

THE SEARCH FOR BALANCE BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AND MEANING IN CAREER

At the age of forty-seven, Aurora faced her second corporate split — but this time, it was her own decision to leave. She accepted a new opportunity presented by a *headhunter* to assume the top Human Resources position for Latin America at one of the world's leading technology companies. For a professional with a growing career trajectory, the offer seemed irresistible:

"It was a company ten times larger than the one I worked for, and they were looking for someone to focus exclusively on Human Resources. That's exactly what I wanted — a chance to consolidate my career. Plus, I could resume traveling around the world again," Aurora emphasized.

She believed that this new position would mark the pinnacle of her HR career: "I finally felt that I was stepping into a position of real influence within the organization. It was an opportunity to put into practice what I truly believed to be the purpose of HR — being at the service of people."

However, the company was in a phase of accelerated growth and demanded a more operational HR function. In addition, the organizational culture was markedly impersonal compared to her previous experiences. Once again, Aurora realized that the position did not align with her professional expectations or personal values:

“In the new company, everything was automated — very different from the previous one. Internal communication happened mostly through the intranet, with very little personal interaction. My routine became extremely intense: long hours, heavy workload, endless travel. One year there felt like four. I grew increasingly frustrated. It became clear to me that my view of what HR should be was completely misaligned with what companies were actually seeking for HR leadership roles.”

This realization marked the beginning of Aurora’s exploration of alternative career formats. She began engaging in self-knowledge practices, examining her feelings, attitudes, and the projects that had brought her the most satisfaction in recent years. Among these, she highlighted the creation of a corporate university for Latin America, leadership training programs, and team-building initiatives — experiences that had strengthened her connection with the field of Human Development. During this period of reflection, Aurora began to seriously consider leaving the corporate world to pursue a more autonomous professional path as a consultant.

After one intense year as an HR executive in the technology multinational, she resigned, determined to transition into Human Development consulting. Shortly thereafter, she received an invitation to become a *senior consultant* in a major HR consulting firm — an opportunity she immediately accepted:

“There was a growing demand for HR consulting at that time, and my experience was highly valued in the market. When I was contacted about a full-time consulting position with a monthly income close to what I earned as an executive, I had no doubts — that would be my next step.”

PREPARING FOR RETIREMENT OR EXPLORING NEW CAREER PATHS?

As an independent consultant, Aurora established partnerships with other firms, focusing on leadership training and development projects directly linked to Human Development: “I continued investing in self-knowledge, aiming to build bridges between my skills and competencies in Human Resources and the evolving demands of the market.”

It was during this stage that Aurora began her education as a biographical counselor¹ at the (Instituto Rudolf Steiner, 2025). This new learning experience not only opened doors to alternative professional opportunities but also deepened her reflections on *life and career cycles*. For the first time, Aurora began to consciously take her life “into her own hands,” developing a long-term plan covering the next seven years: “I was forty-nine and already thinking about how I wanted to reach fifty-six. Now, with a more autonomous career model, planning my professional life in alignment with my life project made perfect sense.”

From that point forward, Aurora began to envision new career paths that would allow her to remain in the field of Human Development, but with greater flexibility. The idea of being able to live and work from anywhere, while traveling and sharing new experiences with her husband, became a central life project — one that promised greater balance between personal and professional fulfillment: “Being able to combine work and quality of life was our project. And why not do that somewhere near the ocean, serving my clients remotely? What was stopping us from dreaming bigger?”

Yet, their dreams were tempered by reality. Every day commitments required significant financial effort to maintain their household budget: both children were in college, and Lucas’s company was undergoing a major restructuring with potential layoffs. Given these circumstances, they decided to postpone any major life changes.

Aurora continued her consulting activities, establishing strategic partnerships with major consulting firms, pursuing coaching certifications, and acquiring a solid client portfolio. These achievements not only ensured the family’s financial stability but also reinforced Aurora’s professional fulfillment as a Human Resources consultant.

¹ The theoretical foundation of biographical counseling is grounded in the work of Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy. This approach was introduced in Brazil by Gudrun and Daniel Burkhard in 1983, when they established Artemisia in São Paulo as a center dedicated to the development of Biographical Work in the country. The process aims to support individuals in engaging in self-reflection through their life narratives, taking into consideration the developmental principles that govern each seven-year life cycle. It posits that, by becoming aware of their inherent potentials and unique characteristics, individuals are able to make freer choices regarding their destiny and to fully realize their lives.

At fifty-six, Aurora's *formal retirement*, in accordance with Brazilian law, did not alter her professional plans. She remained determined to strengthen her position as an executive coach and independent consultant, expanding her work beyond corporate clients to include *individuals* seeking personal development and self-awareness.

At that time, the idea of living in a coastal city began to gain momentum once again. Aurora remained deeply attracted to the idea of a lifestyle change, though she recognized that such a decision could have a major impact on her professional projects. The network of relationships she had built over her career played a crucial role in sustaining her current consulting model: "I knew that moving to another city could put at risk the professional trajectory I had spent a lifetime building."

Her children, now college graduates, had started their own professional lives and did not plan to move. Still unsure, Aurora and Lucas decided to use their vacation time to explore the idea of relocation. They planned a road trip through the northeastern coast of Brazil, stopping in major capitals to observe daily life and local infrastructure: "We drove along the winding BR-101 highway. Beautiful beaches — perfect for a few days of vacation. We spent twenty-three days traveling up the coast, stopping here and there, until we reached Paraíba."

They eventually arrived in *João Pessoa*, the capital of Paraíba — a small city compared to São Paulo, but one that offered sunshine and ocean breezes in abundance. Could this be the right place for the next stage of their lives?

While she felt a sense of freedom, Aurora also understood that she needed to carefully weigh the pros and cons of such a significant change. Her consulting practice had matured, supported by long-term partnerships. She still felt passionate about Human Development and knew that making such a move would require sacrificing part of her established professional base.

That evening, relaxing at sunset on the city's pier while listening to the soft notes of a local saxophonist, Aurora reflected on her life story — her achievements, motivations, and desires. On the verge of turning sixty, she knew she faced a defining decision: should she continue her well-established career in São Paulo, or embrace a transition that could bring deeper integration between her personal life and professional purpose?

ETHICAL NOTE

This teaching case is based on a real-life story. Names and identifying details have been altered to ensure confidentiality and privacy.

TEACHING NOTES

The teaching notes have restricted access and are only available to professors and instructors associated with an academic institution upon request at: <https://periodicístico/cadernosebape/article/view/94675>

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Tania Casado: Conceptualization (Equal); Data curation (Supporting); Formal analysis (Supporting); Investigation (Lead); Methodology (Lead); Project administration (Equal); Writing – original draft (Supporting); Writing – review & editing (Equal).

DATA AVAILABILITY

The dataset supporting the findings of this study is not publicly available.

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