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# The career development of Brand Pretorius

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Roelf van Niekerk

*Department of Industrial and Organizational Psychology,  
Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth, South Africa, and*

Craig Sean Harwood

*Talent and Development, Coca Cola Beverages Africa,  
Port Elizabeth, South Africa and*

*Department of Industrial and Organizational Psychology,  
Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth, South Africa*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to formulate a description of Pretorius’ career development as it is represented in primary and secondary documentary data sources available in the public domain and to interpret his development through the lens of the theoretical career development framework of Jeffrey Greenhaus, Gerard Callanan and Veronica Godshalk (2019).

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study employed a descriptive, longitudinal, idiographic-morphogenic, psychobiographical and single-case study design that enabled the analysis and theoretical interpretation of Pretorius’ career development within the social context in which he lived.

**Findings** – Generally, Pretorius’ career progression matched the stages proposed by Greenhaus *et al.* (2019). Minor exceptions were noted that relate to the occupational and organizational choice and late career stages. Thus, Pretorius’ career development confirms the appropriateness and accuracy of the Greenhaus *et al.* theoretical framework.

**Originality/value** – Although Pretorius attracted considerable attention of journalists to date, this investigation makes an original and significant contribution to the scientific study of his career.

**Keywords** Brand Pretorius, Jeffrey Greenhaus, Career development, Psychobiographical case study, Toyota  
**Paper type** Research article

## Introduction

This psychobiographical case study investigates the career development of Brand Pretorius, who was purposively selected as a research subject due to his extraordinary contributions to the South African business and management context. Pretorius is publicly recognized as one of South Africa’s most successful business leaders in the South African automotive industry (de Vos, 2001; du Plessis, 2011; du Toit, 2013; Gibbs, 2010).

The study employed primary and secondary documentary data that were interpreted according to the theoretical framework of Greenhaus *et al.* (2019). According to this framework, career development typically occurs in four stages: occupational and organizational choice, early career, mid-career and late career.

This study forms part of a larger careerography project (Park-Taylor *et al.*, 2021; Ponterotto and Park-Taylor, 2021) that focuses on the career development of extraordinary South African leaders and entrepreneurs (e.g. Mayer, 2019; Fouche and Van Niekerk, 2010, 2014, 2015a, b; Van Niekerk *et al.*, 2015). The term careerography refers to the study of the work experiences and career trajectory of an extraordinary individual (Park-Taylor *et al.*, 2021). This is the



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second psychobiography that focuses on Pretorius. The first study (Harwood, 2016) focused on his leadership style.

### *Psychobiographical research*

Psychobiographies typically incorporate a biographical account of an extraordinary individual; an analysis of psychological constructs or processes, contextual factors and individual accomplishments; as well as a theoretical interpretation of the life history (Van Niekerk *et al.*, 2016). Generally, the aim is to illuminate – psychologically – the life stories of extraordinary individuals (McAdams, 2009). Ponterotto (2015) defined psychobiography as “the intensive life-span study of an individual of historic significance in socio-cultural context using psychological and historiographic research methods and interpreted from established theories of psychology” (p. 379). Increased interest in this research approach during the last three decades suggests that psychobiographical research has acquired the reputation of an established research genre.

### *Career development*

Greenhaus *et al.* (2019) defined career as a pattern of work-related experiences spanning the course of a person’s life. Career development, on the other hand, refers to a multi-dimensional process during which individuals progress until they reach career maturity (Sharf, 2010). According to Zunker (2010), career development comprises the “psychological, sociological, educational, physical, economic and chance factors that combine to influence the nature and significance of work in the total life span of any given individual” (p. 9). Various theorists conceptualize career development as a life-long process, differentiate predictable developmental stages through which individuals progress and identify developmental tasks characteristic of each stage (Duarte and Lopes, 2018; Gottfredson, 2002; Hommelhoff *et al.*, 2020; Nagy *et al.*, 2019; Schein, 1978; Super, 1980; Super *et al.*, 1996).

Career development theories are popular because they represent comprehensive frameworks that serve as coherent, structured guides for investigations and interventions (Faheem, 2017). However, certain aspects attract criticism that usually focus on the universality of career stages; the relevance of traditional careers; the culture fairness of frameworks; the lack of indigenous frameworks; the lack of evidence for some theoretical propositions; and the potential influence of contextual factors such as culture, environment, gender, sexual orientation and socio-political factors on career development (Faheem, 2017; Hobololo, 2020; McIlveen and Patton, 2006; Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey, 2017).

Greenhaus *et al.* (2019) proposed a stage-based career development framework based on the theoretical contributions of Erikson (1968), Gould (1972), Levinson (1996), Maslow (1970), Schein (1978) and Super (1980). This framework differentiates four stages: occupational and organizational choice, early-, mid- and late career; each associated with a proximate age period and specific development tasks. Greenhaus *et al.* (2019) conceded that progression through the stages is not always orderly but influenced by business, cultural, demographic, economic, gender and global dynamics. They also acknowledged that career stages tend to recur periodically over the course of a career.

The current Greenhaus *et al.* (2019) framework is the fifth edition and is widely used in career management education and training. It has been employed in several psychobiographies including those of the Brazilian author, Paolo Coelho (Mayer, 2019); Dutch priest and author, Henri Nouwen (Van Niekerk *et al.*, 2021); Christiaan Barnard, the cardiac surgeon who performed the world’s first human-to-human heart transplant (Van Niekerk *et al.*, 2015), and the South African anti-apartheid activists, Ahmed Kathrada (Van Niekerk and Botes, 2023) and Albertina Sisulu (Van Niekerk and Freedman, 2023). The stages, proximate age periods and development tasks proposed by Greenhaus *et al.* (2019) are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Theoretical Framework proposed by Greenhaus *et al.* (2019)

	Stage 1 Occupational and organizational choice	Stage 2 Early career	Stage 3 Mid-career	Stage 4 Late career
Age (Years)	18–30	25–45	40–60	55 - Retirement
Developmental tasks	Develop occupational self-image Assess alternative occupations Develop initial occupational choice Pursue the necessary education Obtain job offer(s) from desired organization(s) Select a desired organization	Learn job Learn organizational rules and norms Fit into chosen occupation and organization Increase competence Pursue career goals	Reappraise early career and early adulthood Reaffirm or modify career goals Make choices appropriate to middle adult years Remain productive in work	Remain productive in work Maintain self-esteem Prepare for effective retirement, both financially and mentally

**Research objectives**

The aim of this article is to describe and interpret Pretorius’ life history according to the career development model of Greenhaus *et al.* (2019). The study has three objectives, namely: (1) to formulate a description of Pretorius’ career development as portrayed in primary and secondary documentary data sources available in the public domain, (2) to formulate a brief description of the key contextual influences on Pretorius’ career development and (3) to interpret Pretorius’ career development according to the theoretical framework of Greenhaus *et al.* (2019).

**Research methodology**

*Research design*

Psychobiographical research tends to focus either on development across the lifespan or on discrete lifespan segments (Mayer, 2019; Stake, 2005; van Niekerk *et al.*, 2015). This study employed an idiographic-morphogenic, longitudinal, psychobiographical and single-case study research design (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Mayer, 2019; Ponterotto, 2014; Roberts, 2002).

*Sampling*

Psychobiographical case studies focus on the lives and contributions of extraordinary individuals (Howe, 1997; McAdams, 2009). Pretorius was selected as a psychobiographical subject through purposive sampling (Shaheen and Pradhan, 2019) on the basis of his extraordinary contributions to the South African automotive business and management context. Pretorius is publicly recognized as one of South Africa’s most successful business leaders who has had a significant impact on the business landscape of South Africa (de Vos, 2001; du Plessis, 2011; du Toit, 2013; Gibbs, 2010; Harwood, 2016).

Pretorius received too many awards during his career to list here, but some of the achievements that illustrate his extraordinary status are briefly presented. The awards highlighted his contributions to ethical and exceptional business leadership, business communication, the automotive industry and social investment in literacy programs. The awards include lifetime achievement awards from the Automotive Industry Development Council, CEO Global Magazine and the South African Automotive Yearbook. Both the South African Automotive

Industry and the National Automotive Association of South Africa inducted Pretorius into their Halls of Fame.

Furthermore, three South African universities (Universities of the Free State, Johannesburg and Pretoria) conferred honorary professorships, while the Durban University of Technology and the Central University of Technology conferred honorary doctorates on him.

*Data collection, processing and analysis*

The data collection included both primary (i.e. autobiographical) and secondary (i.e. biographical) documentary data sources (see Table 2) that were available in the public domain (see Allport, 1961). The authors employed the theoretical model of Greenhaus *et al.* (2019), the method for analyzing data proposed by Alexander (1988, 1990), and the approach developed by Miles *et al.* (2013) during the data collection, processing and analysis. The guidelines proposed by Greenhaus *et al.* (2019) were employed during the data collection procedure. These guidelines helped to clarify relevant data in terms of the theoretical constructs. The data processing procedure was based on two strategies proposed by Alexander, namely letting the data set reveal itself and asking the data a question. Lastly, the guidelines proposed by Miles *et al.* (2013) were followed to guide the data analysis and comprised three interrelated processes: data reduction or condensation, data display and conclusion drawing.

*Procedure*

A stepwise procedure developed by Du Plessis (2017) guided the study. This procedure entails (1) selecting the subject, (2) identifying primary and secondary data sources, (3) identifying contextual data, (4) selecting an appropriate psychological framework, (5) allowing the data to reveal itself, (6) asking the data questions, (7) coding the data, (8) selecting formats of display, (9) integrating coding and display, (10) formulating the psychobiography, (11) revising the psychobiography and (12) evaluating the research process.

*Trustworthiness considerations*

Guba (1981) identified four trustworthiness criteria, namely: credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. The authors employed three of these to enhance the rigor of the study. Guba’s fourth criterion, transferability, was excluded because psychobiographical

**Table 2.** Data sources

Primary data sources

- Pretorius (2013)

Secondary Data Sources

- Fluidrock (n.d.). Brand Pretorius. [www.fluidrock.co.za/brand-pretorius/](http://www.fluidrock.co.za/brand-pretorius/)
- Brand Pretorius Abridged CV (2023). [www.brandpretorius.com/about.cfm](http://www.brandpretorius.com/about.cfm)
- Brand Pretorius Resume [www.up.ac.za/media/shared/Legacy/sitefiles/file/rsumbrandpretorius.pdf](http://www.up.ac.za/media/shared/Legacy/sitefiles/file/rsumbrandpretorius.pdf)
- Brand Pretorius retires after 38 years in the SA motor industry [cisp.cachefly.net/assets/articles/attachments/31926\\_mccarthy.pdf](http://cisp.cachefly.net/assets/articles/attachments/31926_mccarthy.pdf)
- De Vos (2001)
- Du Plessis (2011)
- Du Toit (2013)
- Gibbs (2010)
- Harwood (2016)
- Heyns (2013)
- NorthWest University Leadership Summit (2017) [www.nwu.ac.za/leadershipsummit/brand\\_pretorius](http://www.nwu.ac.za/leadershipsummit/brand_pretorius)

findings are not intended to be generalized to other cases. The authors considered eight strategies to meet trustworthiness criteria. The strategies included (1) explicit formulation of research objectives, (2) in-depth description of the research method, (3) operationalization of the theoretical constructs, (4) assiduous engagement with data sources, (5) data-triangulation, (6) use of published data sources, (7) documentation of procedures and (8) the maintenance of a research audit trail (Van der Riet and Durrheim, 2006; Yin, 2018).

### *Ethical considerations*

The authors considered five established ethical guidelines specifically aimed at psychobiographical research (American Psychiatric Association, Report of the Task Force on Psychohistory, 1976; Elms, 1994; Ponterotto, 2017a, 2017b; Runyan, 1982). The considered guidelines are: (1) adopting a balanced and respectful attitude toward the biographical data, (2) taking care to ensure that the contributions of Pretorius are explored objectively and responsibly, (3) interpreting the data in a transparent manner, (4) avoiding reputational damage to Pretorius and his associates, and (5) using resources available in the public domain. The authors requested and received consent from Pretorius to undertake the study.

### **Findings and discussion**

The next section is structured according to the career development stages of Greenhaus *et al.* (2019). Although the framework starts at the age of 18 years, a brief description of Pretorius' childhood and adolescence introduces this section to provide a backdrop for his career development. It is important to keep in mind in this section that psychobiographers do not intend to generalize the findings of their case studies to other cases but rather trace the findings back to the theoretical frameworks in the form of analytical generalization (Yin, 2018).

#### *Childhood and adolescence*

Pretorius was born in Steynsrus, a small farming town, in 1948. His father was a school principal who was later promoted to school inspector (i.e. school superintendent). His mother was a homemaker. The family context was stable, conservative, characterized by strict discipline and an emphasis on responsible behavior and religious values. Although both parents played key roles in his upbringing, the way his mother demonstrated her religious principles "through charity work and her compassion towards other people" (Pretorius, 2013, p. 23) significantly influenced Pretorius. He had three brothers with whom he enjoyed close relationships.

Pretorius developed an interest in motorcycles and cars from an early age. At the age of eight years, he kept scrapbooks and dreamt of becoming a motor vehicle designer (Harwood, 2016; Pretorius, 2013). This interest did not dwindle during the rest of his childhood and adolescence. In fact, it grew stronger, and he never considered a career in another industry. In 1965, his final school year, he planned to join the motor industry once he left school (Pretorius, 2013).

#### *Occupational and organizational choice: 1966–1974 (18–26 years)*

*Findings.* In 1966, Pretorius enrolled at the University of Pretoria for a mechanical engineering degree. However, he did not enjoy the subjects and questioned his initial occupational choice: "... in my heart of hearts I knew that my dream to enter the motor industry would not be attained through a degree in Mechanical Engineering" (Pretorius, 2013, p. 24). At the end of his first year and with the blessing of his parents, he transferred to the University of the Free State, where he enrolled for a commerce degree majoring in Business and Transport Economics. This program matched his interests. During the following three years, Pretorius worked part-time, initially as a sales assistant at a liquor store, and later as a trainee manager at a retail store. Although he remained interested in the motor industry, his exposure to business studies and the sales environment also ignited an interest in the business world (Harwood,

2016; Pretorius, 2013). While studying full-time and working part-time, Pretorius had limited time for a social life. However, two events occurred that enriched his life. In 1968, he met his future wife, Tillie, and he took possession of his first car.

After Pretorius graduated, he registered on a part-time basis for graduate studies in Business Economics, continued to work at the retail store, and started a Renault Car Club. Pretorius indicated that these activities and the associated challenges “proved to be invaluable leadership and management experience” (Pretorius, 2013, p. 28).

In 1970, Pretorius graduated with a B Com Honors degree *Cum Laude* and was appointed as a junior lecturer and researcher at the Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of the Free State. A year later, Pretorius married Tillie and enrolled for a master’s degree with a dissertation titled *A study of the viability of the motor retail sector in Bloemfontein, with special reference to franchise dealers*. During that time, the *Car Magazine* appointed Pretorius as a part-time motorsport correspondent. In 1972, Pretorius completed his master’s degree and reached out to the South African headquarters of Ford, Toyota and Volkswagen. Pretorius enquired about job opportunities and added extracts from his master’s dissertation. Pretorius addressed the letter to Toyota to the Group Public Relations Manager, whom he met earlier through his involvement in the Renault Car Club. Toyota responded positively to Pretorius’ letter and invited him for an interview.

In 1973 at the age of 25 years, Pretorius joined Toyota South Africa (TSA) as Business Management Manager. Seven months later, TSA promoted him to Market Research Manager. This position provided Pretorius with an opportunity to acquire expertise in aspects such as product range, pricing, marketing and distribution. Pretorius adapted successfully to the new roles (Gibbs, 2010; Heyns, 2013): “As a car enthusiast, I was in my element at Toyota. It actually felt as if my hobby had become my job” (Pretorius, 2013, p. 38). During this stage and at a personal level, the Pretorius couple started a family during this stage. Three sons were respectively born in 1974, 1976 and 1979.

*Discussion.* Greenhaus *et al.* (2019) proposed an approximate age range of 18–30 years for the occupational and organizational choice stage and identified five developmental tasks for the two phases: (1) refine an occupational self-image, (2) explore alternative occupations, (3) develop a tentative occupational choice, (4) pursue the education or training required to implement the choice, (5) obtain a job offer from an organization and (6) select an organization that will satisfy career interests, values and aptitudes.

The biographical data indicate that in Pretorius’ case, this stage occurred between the ages of 19–25 years. It is remarkable that Pretorius already chose the occupational sector where he wanted to work at the age of eight years. It is also uncommon for individuals not to explore alternative occupations. For Pretorius, the challenge was to choose the most appropriate education, training and occupation within the automotive sector. Pretorius did not cope successfully with this developmental task the first time around and had to change both the program he initially enrolled for and the institution where he enrolled. His second attempt was successful and matched his interests, values and aptitudes. The commerce degree and his part-time work experiences in the retail sector played an important role in refining his occupational self-image. As far as the second phase of this stage, obtaining a job offer from an organization, is concerned, Pretorius was successful in obtaining an offer as a lecturer/researcher at the University of the Free State. However, it would appear that he viewed this job merely as a stepping stone. He took the initiative in reaching out to the automotive sector and obtained a job offer as Business Management Manager from TSA. This position matched his interests and aspirations. His career at TSA started in January 1973 when he was 25 years old, and this event concluded his occupational and organizational career choice stage.

*Early career: 1974–1991 (26–43 years)*

*Findings.* Pretorius embraced his roles as Business Management Manager and Market Research Manager at TSA (Pretorius, 2013). He experienced fulfilment and performed at his

peak. After almost three years, TSA promoted Pretorius once again in 1976 to the position of Head: Research and Planning Division. A conversation in the same year with the then Managing Director of TSA, Colin Adcock, had a profound impact on his career. Adcock told Pretorius that he had the potential to succeed him in the future. Pretorius experienced this as a watershed moment in terms of how he viewed himself and his future career (Harwood, 2016; Pretorius, 2013).

Three more promotions occurred between 1977–1980. TSA promoted Pretorius as Area Sales Manager in 1977 and as National Sales Manager in 1978. Then, in 1980, at the age of 32, TSA promoted Pretorius to the position of Sales Director. During this time, Pretorius benefitted from the mentorship of senior managers at Toyota, such as Albert Wessels, Colin Adcock and Phil Porter [1]. His management and leadership style was also enriched by principles endorsed by the Toyota Motor Corporation, Japan, such as the *Kaizen* [2] approach and an emphasis on thorough planning, analysis, attention to detail, individual commitment, meaningful consultation, politeness and professionalism. Four years later, in 1984, Pretorius was promoted again to the position of Group Marketing Director, a position he held until 1988 when he was appointed as Managing Director of TSA Marketing.

At the time, TSA was doing very well and had achieved market leadership in terms of sales. However, the figures for customer satisfaction and retention were less impressive. Pretorius designed and launched the *Toyota Touch* program which resulted in Toyota then moving into the top position in national customer satisfaction indices.

During the 1970s and 1980s, South Africa experienced considerable political and social turmoil. The widespread labor unrest, trade sanctions, and the deterioration in the value of South African currency had an adverse impact on South African businesses (Natrass, 2019). Pretorius experienced these years as a period of “*political awakening*” (Pretorius, 2013, p. 42) that encouraged him to adopt a more active and constructive stance with regard to the socio-political challenges. TSA also experienced major changes. Adcock retired and was replaced by Albert Wessels’ son, Bert.

*Discussion.* Greenhaus *et al.* (2019) proposed an approximate age range for this stage of 25–45 years. The early career stage comprises two phases: finding a niche in the adult world and striving to be successful. Five tasks are associated with this stage, namely to: (1) master the technical requirements of the job, (2) acquire organizational norms and values, (3) fit into the chosen occupation and organization, (4) increase competence and being accepted as a valued employee and to (5) pursue career goals (Greenhaus *et al.*, 2019).

The biographical data indicate that Pretorius’ early career occurred between the ages of 26–43 Years. Between 1976 and 1984, TSA promoted Pretorius five times. The frequency of promotions confirms that Pretorius mastered the first four developmental tasks of this stage at a young age. It is important to note that Pretorius not only achieved personal success, but he also contributed significantly to the success of TSA, which became the undisputed market leader in the South African automobile industry while he was in the early career stage.

Pretorius (2013) described the conversation with the managing director as a watershed moment in his career. The biographical data confirm that this conversation enabled him to clarify his personal vision, values, as well as the functional and leadership roles he aspired to.

As far as the proximate age range is concerned, the biographical data indicate that Pretorius started the early career stage earlier than what Greenhaus *et al.* (2019) proposed. He responded remarkably well to the developmental tasks of the early career stage and was promoted to the position of Sales Director at the age of 32 years, Group Marketing Director at the age of 36 years and Managing Director of TSA Marketing at the age of 40 years. Pretorius’ exceptional responses to the career development tasks associated with the early career stage hold the key, or at least one of the keys, to the remarkable career success he achieved.

*Mid-career 1991–2008 (43–60 years)*

*Findings.* The mid-career stage is known as an unsettling stage. Levinson (1996) referred to it as a midlife crisis that may represent a time of deep satisfaction or bitter disappointments (Levinson, 1996). At the start of Pretorius' mid-career stage, he was confronted by several serious challenges. First, Albert Wessels died in 1991. Second, at the time, business leaders and politicians worked behind the scenes to ensure a smooth transition to a democratic dispensation. Pretorius participated in this process. Third, in 1992, widespread and protracted strikes brought production at the TSA assembly plant to a standstill and made distribution of spare parts to dealers difficult. The strike presented Pretorius with the biggest leadership challenge up until that moment (Pretorius, 2013).

These challenges forced Pretorius to work hard and long hours. It "inevitably led to self-neglect, as well as neglect of the people closest to me" (Pretorius, 2013, p. 49). This awareness triggered considerable reflection on his career and future at TSA: "At that stage, I had been with the group for nearly 20 years and seriously began to think about the desirability of a new challenge" (Pretorius, 2013, p. 45).

Late in 1994, Pretorius received a job offer from McCarthy Motor Holdings (MMH), South Africa's largest motor retailer: "The anguish that I went through during this decision-making process was intense . . . At the same time, there was a strong yearning for both a new challenge and a more balanced life" (Pretorius, 2013, p. 48). Pretorius decided to accept the offer:

I was excited about the opportunity to join McCarthy. I had a keen interest in the retail side of the automotive business and looked forward to a stimulating learning experience . . . Emotionally it was very difficult for me to say goodbye to a company and its people who had done so much for me and that had meant so much to me (Pretorius, 2013, p. 49).

MMH had a network of 105 dealers, represented 25 different brands, employed 5,500 people, sold 60,000 vehicles per annum, and had a customer base of 500,000 vehicle owners (Harwood, 2016). The transition from the more structured, long-term approach of TSA to the fast-moving, short-term approach of MMH proved to be more challenging than anticipated. In 1997, eighteen months after joining MMH, Pretorius' career was turned upside down: "*Our disappointing financial results as well as the perceived lack of team spirit at the senior executive level resulted in Brian McCarthy, the chairman of the group, suggesting that I rather vacate my position . . .*" (Pretorius, 2013, p. 51). In response, Pretorius requested more time to prove himself and this was granted. Gradually, as a result of his changed leadership approach as well as the implementation of new initiatives, the tide turned for the better at MMH.

In the middle-1990s, Pretorius was one of the most recognized, distinguished, and admired business leaders in South Africa. Several listed companies invited him to serve as non-executive director on their boards. During his career, Pretorius served on more than 40 boards.

At this time, the Toyota Motor Corporation Japan offered Pretorius the position of CEO and Executive Vice President of Toyota Motor Corporation Europe: "*This opportunity undoubtedly represented the pinnacle of my career in the motor industry. From many points of view it was my dream job, the ideal entry point into the global motor industry*" (Pretorius, 2013, p. 53). Surprisingly, Pretorius turned the offer down: "*I had no desire to leave South Africa . . . There was an active engagement with the 'new' South Africa and a high level of enthusiasm for and commitment to it*" (Pretorius, 2013, p. 53). An example of this "active engagement" (Pretorius, 2013, p. 53) is the establishment of *Rally to Read* in 1998, a program aimed at improving the language, literacy and communication of children who attend disadvantaged primary schools in remote, rural areas.

In 1999 Pretorius again received a job offer, namely that of Group Marketing Director of Sanlam, a South African financial services group. Again, Pretorius declined the offer. In the same year McCarthy Retail Limited (MRL) appointed Pretorius as Chief Operating Officer and seven months later appointed him as CEO. Although it was now clear that Pretorius had overcome his initial adjustment problems, the financial position of MRL was precarious and the jobs of 6,000 employees were at stake. To make matters worse, in the same year cancer

claimed the life of Brian McCarthy, the Chairperson of MRL. Pretorius led the restructuring of McCarthy and oversaw the successful implementation of a comprehensive turnaround plan (Harwood, 2016).

In 2001, the auditors informed Pretorius that MRL was technically insolvent. Pretorius and his team worked hard to manage one of the largest debt-to-equity conversions (i.e. a financial restructuring process where a company's debt is exchanged for ownership shares) in the history of South Africa: "... the two-year roller-coaster ride leading up to the recapitalization of McCarthy left me emotionally drained and physically exhausted. It was an all-absorbing, highly stressful and sometimes also a humiliating experience" (Pretorius, 2013, p. 62). After the recapitalization process, Pretorius commented that adversity reveals but also builds character and that the insolvency and recapitalization of MRL represented a fulfilling journey of self-discovery and enriching leadership experience (Pretorius, 2013).

Following the recapitalization process, MRL was largely owned by a consortium of banks and this complicated Pretorius' task. The group suffered more setbacks in 2002, including the disposal of dealerships and the liquidation of the Retail Apparel Group (RAG), a business that employed 3,000 people. During this liquidation, Pretorius had to manage staff, suppliers, liquidators, labor unions, as well as the media. To make matters worse, the Minister of Justice announced an enquiry to establish whether correct procedures were followed during the liquidation of RAG. Pretorius experienced the inquiry as a politically motivated process and described it as "... undoubtedly the low point of my career" (Pretorius, 2013, p. 69). Fortunately, the restructuring of MRL progressed well and gradually the financial health of the company improved.

At the end of 2003, the Bidvest Group (an international services, trading and distribution company listed in South Africa and operating on four continents) offered to buy MRL. MRL became part of the Bidvest Group on 1 January 2004. Pretorius had to manage another challenging transition from a company controlled by a consortium of banks into an entrepreneurial one. He achieved this successfully and the team enjoyed being part of a successful culture again.

The mid-career stage represented an eventful and demanding period in the life of Pretorius. However, it also represented a stage during which he received no less than 28 awards (For a complete list, see Pretorius, 2013, pp. 251–253). The awards included honorary professorships, businessperson of the year, medals, honorary fellowships, certificates of excellence, membership in halls of fame and lifetime achievement awards.

At this stage, Pretorius was 56 years old and due to retire in 2008. In the next few years, he faced more challenges, including finding a successor, acquiring local distribution rights for Chinese vehicles and heavy equipment, accelerating transformation, improving the leadership team's ability to manage cultural diversity and managing the global financial meltdown that significantly impacted the automotive industry (Pretorius, 2013).

*Discussion.* According to Greenhaus *et al.* (2019) the approximate age range for this stage is 40–60 years. The four career-related tasks of the mid-career stage are to (1) reappraise the early career and early adulthood lifestyle, (2) reaffirm or modify career goals, (3) make choices appropriate to the mid-career and (4) remain productive. The approximate duration of this stage is 20 years, but Greenhaus *et al.* (2019) indicated that the mid-career often lasts longer.

The biographical data indicates that Pretorius' mid-career stage started in 1991 when he was 43 years old. The stage was brought on by the stress, dissatisfaction and conflicted emotions caused by the death of one of his mentors as well as political change in the country and labor unrest that severely impacted TSA's business. In addition, the day-to-day executive leadership demands were also taking their toll and had a negative influence on the lifestyle of Pretorius and his family. It is possible that Pretorius recognized that he may not advance further at TSA, that he has reached a plateau, and that this intensified his restlessness.

These factors prompted Pretorius to reappraise the career goals and lifestyle he developed during the early career stage. During the reappraisal process, Pretorius realized that it was difficult to achieve an acceptable work–life balance at TSA (Harwood, 2016).

Pretorius' reputation as a business leader secured him three job offers during his mid-career stage. The first one from the MMH caused Pretorius considerable confusion. On the one hand, Pretorius was happy and successful at TSA and he enjoyed healthy collegial relationships. On the other hand, the promise of a lifestyle change attracted him to the offered position.

Pretorius accepted the offer and transferred to MMH at the beginning of 1995. The honeymoon period in the new position was brief and lasted only 18 months. The requirements of the position were different from what he expected, the financial results disappointing and the relationships at the senior executive level strained. After more than twenty successful years, Pretorius experienced his first major career crisis. The crisis included a request to vacate his position. Ironically, when Pretorius received other attractive job offers from Toyota Motor Corporation, Japan, and Sanlam, he turned them down. Pretorius was committed to improving the situation at MMH, contributing to South Africa, and remaining productive. The biographical data also suggest that Pretorius' hopes of a more balanced lifestyle did not materialize at MMH. His promotion to the position of Chief Operating Officer and CEO of MRL forced him to remain productive and to reaffirm both his career goals and commitment to McCarthy. The recapitalization, restructuring, and implementation of the turnaround plan proved to be a real test for Pretorius and naturally took its toll. However, his belief that adversity builds character improves leadership, as well as his commitment to dignified, ethical and principled conduct, benefited him ([cisp.cachefly.net/assets/articles/attachments/31926\\_mccarthy.pdf](http://cisp.cachefly.net/assets/articles/attachments/31926_mccarthy.pdf)). After the financial situation of MRL improved, other serious challenges followed. These include the disposal of dealerships, the liquidation of RAG and the retrenchment of staff, as well as the ministerial inquiry. Also, when Bidvest acquired MRL in 2004, Pretorius managed the challenging transition. Thereafter, other challenges came to the fore, such as finding a successor, acquiring local distribution rights for Chinese vehicles and heavy equipment, accelerating transformation, improving the leadership team's ability to manage cultural diversity and managing the global financial meltdown that had significant implications for the automotive industry.

Generally, the findings indicate that although Pretorius experienced considerable turmoil in the mid-career stage, he coped well with all four developmental tasks throughout the 17 demanding years that this stage lasted. The success that he achieved with each of the tasks, as well as the resilience and effective leadership, contributed to the overall success of his extraordinary career.

#### *Late career: 2008–2025 (60–77 years)*

*Findings.* As the compulsory retirement date of Pretorius approached, the Bidvest Chairman, Brian Joffe and Pretorius agreed to postpone the date by three years from 2008 to 2011. This agreement was motivated by the uncertainty surrounding McCarthy's financial situation and because an appropriate successor had not yet been identified.

During this time, several educational institutions and professional organizations reached out to Pretorius. For example, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) appointed Pretorius as a Fellow, while the Albert Luthuli Centre for Responsible Leadership at the University of Pretoria appointed him as one of three Visiting Executives. Similarly, the University of Stellenbosch appointed him to the Advisory Board of its Business School, while the Motor Industry Ombudsman of South Africa also appointed him on their Advisory Council.

In 2010, the new vehicle market regained momentum and McCarthy's financial results improved significantly in what was its centenary year. Joffe decided unilaterally to unbundle McCarthy's consolidated structure. This unbundling process had negative implications for Pretorius' career: "My organizational sphere of influence had been significantly curtailed and diluted" (Pretorius, 2013, p. 83). Pretorius retired the next year: "On 1 March I closed my office door behind me – my career as a full-time business executive spanning 38 years was over" (Pretorius, 2013, p. 85).

Following his retirement, Pretorius remained active in several contexts. He served as director in a non-executive capacity on the boards of several companies and organizations until 2021; mentored and coached young business leaders; lectured at universities, business schools, and in organizations; and promoted literacy amongst primary school learners in South Africa. In 2013, he published a book entitled *In the Driving Seat – Lessons in Leadership*. This book was reprinted seven times and is regarded as one of the most popular local business biographies ([www.nwu.ac.za/leadershipsummit/brand\\_pretorius](http://www.nwu.ac.za/leadershipsummit/brand_pretorius)). In 2025, Pretorius celebrated his 77th birthday. He still continues to make a difference to South Africa and its people by “learning, teaching and serving” (<https://www.fluidrock.co.za/brand-pretorius/>).

*Discussion.* According to Greenhaus *et al.* (2019), the approximate age range for the late career stage is 55 years until retirement. This stage is characterized by three tasks, namely to: (1) continue to contribute productively to their organizations, (2) maintain a sense of self-worth and dignity, and (3) anticipate and plan for an effective retirement.

The biographical data indicate that Pretorius responded satisfactorily to the first two tasks. He entered the late career stage in 2008 at the age of 60. By agreeing to postpone his retirement, he demonstrated commitment to Bidvest and to continue to make a contribution. After his retirement in 2011, he continued to contribute by serving as a director in a non-executive capacity on the boards of companies, ploughing back into the development of young business leaders; doing presentations to students and business leaders, and promoting literacy amongst primary school learners.

Pretorius’ self-worth and dignity benefited from the invitations by higher education institutions and professional organizations to become a fellow, visiting executive, or member of an advisory board as well as the enthusiastic reception of the book he published in 2013. Pretorius still enjoys good health and does not seem to anticipate or plan for an effective retirement yet.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to career development, psychobiographical research, careerographies, Pretorius’ life story, and the study of leadership. Pretorius’ career development matches the proximate ages of the stages proposed by Greenhaus *et al.* (2019). Five aspects deserve special mention. First, Pretorius identified the occupational sector in which he wanted to work during his childhood and never explored alternatives. Second, his first choice of a degree program represented a false start, and he had to start again a year later. Third, his career started on a positive note and he received several promotions at an early age. Fourth, during the mid-career stage, Pretorius faced serious challenges and experienced considerable turmoil. At the same time, he received recognition and affirmation from multiple. By and large, Pretorius coped well with the taxing developmental tasks of the mid-career stage, and this success contributed to the overall success of his extraordinary career. Fifthly, at the age of 77 years, Pretorius does not seem to anticipate or plan for an effective retirement yet. Thus, Pretorius’ career development generally, with only a few minor exceptions, confirms the appropriateness and accuracy of the Greenhaus *et al.* (2019) theoretical framework.

The study also contributes to psychobiographical research that is rapidly expanding both internationally and in South Africa. The study provides a detailed description of the developmental trajectory of an extraordinary business leader and provides examples of the positive and negative events and experiences that contributed to Pretorius’ career development. More specifically, the study contributes to careerographical research. It addresses the scarcity of studies that focus specifically on the careers of exceptional business leaders and entrepreneurs and highlights the value of longitudinal studies of their career trajectories.

Pretorius is one of the best-known and most admired leaders in the South African automobile industry. This was confirmed at Pretorius’ retirement (see [cisp.cachefly.net/assets/articles/attachments/31926\\_mccarthy.pdf](http://cisp.cachefly.net/assets/articles/attachments/31926_mccarthy.pdf)). The CEO of the Retail Motor Industry singled out his leadership, vision and extraordinary ability to inspire people, while the Chairman of the

National Automobile Dealers Association added that Pretorius brought respect, dignity and status to the industry. The Director of the National Association of Automobile Manufacturers of South Africa stated that the:

SA automotive industry remains indebted to Brand for his high standards, professionalism and visionary leadership skills in promoting the interests of all sectors of this dynamic, multi-faceted and very complex industry. His relationships with industry and other stakeholders were based on mutual respect and trust. ([https://cisp.cachefly.net/assets/articles/attachments/31926\\_mccarthy.pdf](https://cisp.cachefly.net/assets/articles/attachments/31926_mccarthy.pdf))

As far as the study's contribution to the study of leadership is concerned, journalists and researchers agree that leaders are required to function in increasingly uncertain environments, manage rapid change, deal with disruptive technologies and cope with a myriad of factors. They indicate that these factors contribute to a pervasive leadership crisis and shortage of competent, effective and ethical leadership (Edelman Trust Barometer (2022) Grobler and Koen, 2024; Institute of Justice and Reconciliation, 2023; Mabothe and Ngcamu, 2024; Milner and Warren, 2023; SABPP Fact Sheet, 2017; Why the world in 2015 faces a leadership crisis, 2014).

Several authors suggested that the life stories of extraordinary leaders can function as an important source of information in understanding leadership dynamics because life stories emphasize the dynamic, non-linear and contextual nature of leadership and can therefore guide the development of leaders (Milner and Warren, 2023; Murphy and Johnson, 2011; Nkomo and Kriek, 2011; Zacher *et al.*, 2015). Pretorius is an effective, respected and ethical leader who demonstrated exceptional ability to lead, solve problems, resolve crises and inspire people. The study of his career development could thus be used in leadership development programs to illustrate the evolution and manifestation of exceptional leadership.

The authors acknowledge three shortcomings of the study, namely that the study focuses on a single domain of Pretorius' life; that the findings only reflect data available in the public domain; and that the authors did not have an opportunity to validate the findings with Pretorius or his relatives.

The authors therefore recommend that researchers from different disciplines employ alternative theoretical frameworks to illuminate additional aspects of Pretorius' career and leadership. They also recommend that similar studies be conducted on other prominent and exemplary business leaders.

#### Notes

1. In 1961, Wessels acquired the rights to distribute Toyota vehicles in South Africa. He was the Executive Chairman of TSA. Adcock was the Managing Director of TSA while Porter was the Director: Planning and Technical Affairs.
2. Kaizen: A "never be satisfied" mindset.

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**Corresponding author**

Roelf van Niekerk can be contacted at: [roelf.vanniekerk@mandela.ac.za](mailto:roelf.vanniekerk@mandela.ac.za)