

Research: As Careers Get Longer, Midcareer Work Needs to Change

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At a recent leadership meeting that I attended as an advisor, the CEO of a large global company paused midway through a discussion on talent. “We have a problem,” he said. “Burnout is becoming a real issue.”

That came as no surprise. But what he went on to tell the group next caught everyone in the room off guard. “It’s not where we expected it,” he said. “It’s not early career employees. And it’s not people at the end of their careers. It’s people in their mid-40s and early 50s.”

The CEO went on to explain that many of those struggling were not average performers. They were among the organization’s most experienced and capable leaders—the very people the company was expecting to move into its most senior roles. But these people were disengaging and stalling out in their careers, and the company was losing talent and institutional knowledge as a result. “We are losing momentum at exactly the point we need it most,” the CEO said.

In the conversations my research team and I conduct with leaders every couple of months to discuss the future of work, I’ve heard many similar concerns. Leaders are worried about how the pressures of midlife are affecting the experienced professionals who occupy positions in their company’s leadership pipeline. Typically, organizations think about this problem at the individual level—some people just burn themselves out. But what I’ve discovered in my work is that the problem is systemic: People in their 40s are suffering as a cohort because they’re

trying to soldier through careers that might last 50 or 60 years—and are doing so using outdated assumptions about careers that used to last only 30 years.

Longevity is now a workforce-management reality. It used to be that people in their 40s were at the beginning of the end of their careers, but now they might have 30 or more years still to go. Research suggests that people currently in their mid-40s are likely to need to work into their early to mid-70s, and those currently in their 20s potentially into their late 70s or beyond. The pipeline of people navigating 50-60-year careers is large and growing, and organizations need to adapt to that new reality.

My research on longevity and work shows that in these lengthening careers, workers in their 20s regularly experiment, believing that they have time to try things, adjust, and make sideways moves. Workers in their 60s, now more reflective and deliberate, also find new possibilities opening up for themselves. In between them, however, are workers in the “pivotal 40s,” a decade when people carry peak institutional responsibility and face maximum time pressure. These workers are those who are the least able to experiment and reflect—and yet the decisions that they make at this stage will shape everything they do for decades to come.

To understand this emerging reality more deeply, I recently developed and piloted a 10-week program for 20 mid- and senior-level professionals from three global companies, headquartered in France, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The program blended diagnostics, deep individual weekly reflective exercises, and conversations within company peer groups in which participants described their decisions, pressures, and trade-offs.

What emerged was not simply a snapshot of people struggling with overload. It was the story of a new and structurally distinct phase of working life—one that organizations need to understand and accommodate as they think about how to manage their talent.

In this article, I’ll discuss the main findings of that pilot, which is a part of an ongoing study with my research collaborators. Then I’ll recommend actions that executives can take to ensure that the people in their leadership pipeline have the time and energy to design sustainable careers for themselves and for their organizations.

Consistent Dynamics

In our conversations, participants consistently described a convergence of pressures: Peak responsibilities at work and at home, sustained time scarcity, increasing awareness of the need to adapt and reskill, and—critically—very limited capacity to step back and reflect. In diagnostics I’ve carried out, professionals in their 40s consistently score lowest on “calm,” or the capacity for reflection and reset.

During the program, however, many participants began to question long-held assumptions about work. They spoke about a growing tension they feel in their 40s between short-term demands and the need to think more deliberately about the next phase of their lives.

Three consistent dynamics emerged from these conversations:

Reflection is rare—and changes everything when it happens.

Our participants were highly experienced professionals, but even so, they were surprised to learn just how much insight they could generate about themselves and their careers if they were granted the time for individual structured reflection and peer conversations. Many came to realize the ways in which earlier decisions they had made with little reflection—about roles, industries, and ways of working—had shaped their current trajectory. Participants described reflection as valuable because it helped them see how their working lives had been shaped over time by accumulated patterns of experience, personality, and organizational roles, and gave them greater agency over future choices.

There is a shift from endurance to sustainability.

Across groups, participants noted that, in their 40s, they were rethinking what success means and how it is achieved. Increasingly, what matters to them is not output but meaning, not extreme effort but balance, not inherited expectations but conscious choice. Many nonetheless remain constrained in their thinking about success by the demands of their current roles, which puts them in a psychologically uncomfortable state of limbo.

The dominant tension is not performance but identity.

Participants in their 40s told us that their primary concern in their working lives was no longer how to perform better. Instead, they wanted to know if they were in the right environment, how much they should adapt, and what it means to remain authentic. As they thought about reconciling identity, role, and future trajectory, they were asking themselves: What has made me who I am, and what do I want to become for the next 30 years?

Perhaps the most important finding of our study was this: Midlife is the point at which change is most necessary but least likely to happen. Time pressures, major responsibilities, and rising organizational expectations all make deliberate change difficult. In a context where skills are rapidly evolving, careers are lengthening, and burnout is already high, workers in the pivotal 40s are being asked to work in ways that are not sustainable in the long term.

That has to change if organizations want to cultivate and retain leaders for tomorrow. The goal today is to reframe that period for workers as one of active redesign, not passive endurance. Critically, this is not about asking people to do more. It is about creating the conditions that will allow them to make choices about their work early enough to matter.

What Leaders Should Do Differently

If the 40s are the pressure point in a long career, then the question for leaders is: How do you create the conditions for people to recalibrate at that time, exactly when they have the least space to do so?

Our research suggests four courses of action:

Build in structured moments for reflection and conversation.

The most important intervention is the simplest. Mid-career professionals consistently report having no space to step back, reflect, and talk to colleagues, despite recognizing its importance. Leaders can address this problem by creating structured reflection and conversational pauses for workers in their pivotal 40s: mid-career reviews that focus on long-term direction in addition to performance; short sabbaticals or time-bound reflection periods; facilitated group programs, like ours, that create shared space for reflection; or explicit conversations about career sustainability instead of career progression.

These moments are not about stepping away from work. They're about enabling workers to think and talk to their peers about where they are in the long arc of their careers, and where they want to go. Without such moments, people tend to fall into careers that are reactive and path dependent. With them, they're more likely to make deliberate, forward-looking choices.

So, the question for leaders is: Where have we built in time for workers in their pivotal 40s to pause and reflect rather than just deliver?

Redesign roles to stretch people, not just use them.

Mid-career roles are often designed for execution rather than development, and for vertical reach rather than horizontal stretch. Yet this is precisely the stage at which people need to expand their capabilities. Leaders can support that effort by creating opportunities for growth within existing roles. This can include reshaping responsibilities to include new challenges; encouraging cross-functional collaboration; facilitating mentoring relationships or reverse mentoring; and enabling people to "craft" aspects of their work to increase meaning and learning.

These are not large structural changes. But they allow people to expand their capabilities without leaving their role or losing career momentum.

The key question for leaders to ask is: How can the person in this role continue to grow?

Make exploration legitimate, not extracurricular.

One of the clearest findings from our work is that mid-career professionals lack the time and permission for exploration, which is critical for sustaining a long career. Leaders can address this by legitimizing low-risk exploration. Options include side projects that test new skills or interests; short courses or learning experiences that build adjacent capabilities; internal secondments or temporary assignments; and volunteering or mentoring opportunities that broaden perspective. These experiences serve as "identity laboratories," allowing people to experiment with new directions without making immediate, high-stakes decisions.

The question for leaders is: Where do people have permission to explore, not just perform?

Normalize transitions before they become urgent.

In many organizations, career moves are reactive, triggered by dissatisfaction, burnout, or external opportunity. That's impractical and unsustainable in a 50- or 60-year career. Instead, leaders should normalize mid-career transitions as part of a long working life. They should encourage lateral moves across functions or geographies; support skill pivots into adjacent areas; recognize that identity and capability evolve over time; and understand career movement as not disruption but reinvestment. It's a mindset shift: Leaders and organizations need to start thinking of mid-career as not a period of stability but a phase in which recalibration is both necessary and expected.

The question for leaders is: Are we making it easier for people to move before they feel compelled to escape?

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Longevity is changing the shape of working life, and nowhere is that more visible than in the pivotal 40s. What looks like burnout is often something deeper: people trying to sustain decades-long careers using assumptions built for much shorter ones. Organizations that understand this will not simply support employees through mid-career; they will redesign work so that people can continue to grow, adapt, and contribute across a far longer future.