Identifying lost productivity
Michael Klachefsky

Midlife career changes
Sunny Ainley

Long-term care collaboration
Lucinda Jesson
We’ve all heard the predictions about baby boomers or the aging population as these “second lifers” retire and look forward to the next phase of life. Many employers have hastily designed communication and outreach campaigns to attract and woo this large workforce group, fearing the impending labor shortage. But they often ignore an even larger pocket of capable professionals who may have 20-plus career years ahead of them.

Mid-career professionals represent 53 percent of all working-aged adults in Minnesota (2009 U.S. Census Bureau, age groups 35–59) and have much to offer a company, if you know what to look for and how to develop these professionals within your own organization.

Midlife career changes

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Crisis or calling: What does “mid-career” really mean?

Career is defined as a long-term or lifelong job. Perhaps that’s old-school thinking, as we can all enjoy multiple careers in our working years, possibly even after our traditional working years as “career volunteerism.”

The key word is “long-term.” As we enter the early job years, most of us wander from job to job, often driven by better pay or aimless ladder climbing. We are not thinking about long-term career development or lifelong development. Conversely, as we enter the “exit” years, we are certainly not focused on what a long-term new work career might look like.

Only during our middle work years do we tend to awaken to this transformational career period. The early and later work years are the bookends to the meaty mid-career years. These years can be a time of disruption, discovery, development, clarity, and satisfaction.

Mid-career is an emotional and purposeful crossroads between work life and personal fulfillment. It is the time in life when you question if the work that you do is meaningful and aligned to your gifts, values, and purpose. Many factors influence mid-career change, such as loss of employment, personal/life changes, greater purpose and satisfaction, and/or closer alignment of work-life values. It can be either a crisis or a calling that pushes someone forward to investigate what other career options exist and what might be an authentic fit.

Michael Smith, 43, had a lucrative six-figure IT job until the day he suffered a debilitating back injury. He struggled with his healing process and experienced limited access to quality care, eventually losing his job, home, wife, and most everything else. Frustrated and depressed, he researched his options, and enrolled in a health IT training program at Normandale Community College. This launched the exciting process of discovering himself, his gifts, and his talents, and mapping those to possible career paths that would allow him to work in his passions: information technology and improved health care. Michael’s journey was driven by crisis but transformed into fulfillment and clarity. Smith is now working for a large integrated health care provider, leveraging his deep IT knowledge to help the organization provide safer and better care for the patients his company serves.

Why hire a mid-career professional?

Most mid-career professionals are seeking companies and jobs that align to personal values and beliefs, naturally establishing a deeper level of commitment and shared mission. With 10–20 years of work experience, “mid-careerers” tend to have practiced and transferable skills that easily translate between industries or disciplines, as well as a large network of contacts and resources that can be leveraged for work.

Another benefit of experience is a well-developed emotional intelligence when communicating, dealing with conflict, and relating to others. Since these workers are more in tune with their strengths and interests, self-motivation is high for this type of professional. Hiring managers will also see a natural curiosity and willingness to tackle unfamiliar projects in the search for development and learning.

How to identify a mid-career professional

No one will walk in with a Post-it on her forehead with “mid-career” written on it, but you will find some commonalities. Whether you are meeting face-to-face or reviewing a paper résumé, a mid-career candidate may demonstrate self-confidence without arrogance. These professionals are the “sages” of the workforce, wise because of reflection and experience but with many more years of fruitful and fulfilling work ahead.

The mid-careerer will tend to inquire about aspects of the job or company that are outside of typical questions such as salaries, benefits, and vacation and more about qualitative aspects such as the vision and culture of an organization, professional development opportunities, management and leadership styles, and hiring and retention practices. With these candidates, you will see and hear competencies, passions, gifts, values, and experience midlife career changes to page 30

Midlife career changes

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related to the specific work role and how they will help the organization succeed.

How to develop your own mid-career professionals

Either you seek out talented mid-career professionals, develop your employees internally, or wait for them to do the hard work themselves and leave your organization for greener pastures. If you invest in a career-life development program to help individuals discover and actualize who they are while developing the gifts and talents they possess, you enable the company to more quickly weave these into the organizational needs and create a trusted relationship with your employees.

One method could be to reinstate or revise the individual development plan. Goals and development should be a combination of not only professional goals but also personal growth and fulfillment, instilling an emotional passion for the work employees do and the contributions they make.

Many companies are investing in mid-career internship programs because they see the value of offering practical learning for these seasoned workers, providing loyalty, opportunity and reinspired employees. These internships also cultivate enterprise intelligence, a better understanding of an organization’s overall business and mission, and a valuable testing period for the prospective employee.

A common pitfall for companies is to ignore the mid-careerer and focus on the newbies, believing the mid-careerer is fully capable of directing and managing autonomously (that’s why you hired her, right?). That is most likely the case, but it presents a missed opportunity to capitalize on untapped potential. Mid-careerers crave attention, acknowledgement, and development, and value mentorship. If nurtured, they will continue to grow and prosper as employees if their contributions are valued.

Mid-career transition can be daunting, but with a bit of guidance and structure, very rewarding and possibly life-changing. Hiring managers should not ignore this potential pool of talent when hiring or for professional development and advancement. The return on investment will show itself when employees are purpose-driven, personally aligned to the mission of the work—and happy.

Sunny Ainley is the associate dean at the Center for Applied Learning at Normandale Community College in Bloomington and is a mid-careerer working in her passion by empowering people and organizations to live and work in prosperity and purpose.

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