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The Changing World of the Mid-Career Professional

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If you're like most mid-career professionals, you've probably observed numerous changes in your workplace or industry. You may be angry, confused, scared, or resigned. You may feel that the world of work is going to pass you by or that you can't keep up. That's how Brenda, a 42-year-old top advertising executive, felt when she was told by her boss, "There was a Brenda era, and now it's time for a new era."

Change has become a constant in corporate America, but it can be a change for the better rather than for the worse. In fact, many of those in their mid-career years talk about forced change as giving them the opportunity of a lifetime. As strange as it may seem, losing a job or being unhappy in retirement was the catalyst for them to pursue their dreams and make work matter again. Yes, change may make some people feel left behind and longing for the old, pre-change days. But for those who are perceptive and adaptive, change can also provide the energy necessary to capitalize on new opportunities—opportunities that can transform bad careers into good ones and good ones into great ones. That latter statement is easy to make, but it's tough for a 55-year-old to do much about it after she has been replaced by someone 20 years her junior. It's also a challenge for a middle-aged manager who feels he is stuck in a job rut and thinks he'll never get out because of his age.

The good news: We've seen many mid-career people free themselves from bad jobs and other negative work situations, discovering fulfilling careers that they had never dreamed were possible. This

book is written to help people get unstuck and move on with their lives and reinvigorated careers.

We don't want to sugarcoat the changes that have distressed many of you. We do, however, want to emphasize that these changes open doors that were formerly closed. As you read, keep in mind that it's natural to view change with a certain amount of trepidation, but with time and knowledge, change can lead you in exciting new career directions and may even reveal your true calling.

The first step in the right direction is to help you understand what the changing world of work means to mid-career professionals. In this way, you can learn to avoid the common missteps in reaction to these changes as well as view them from a realistic and positive perspective. Let's start out by examining what has changed and how it's affecting people in your age range.

SIX CHALLENGING TRENDS

Change usually increases work stress and provides professionals with significant new challenges. Over the years, people have had to adapt to everything from mainframe computers to automated answering machines. They have adjusted to dips in the economy as well as the emergence of new, unexpected competitors. Then, as now, people were threatened and confused.

The difference is that back then, after people complained, they generally realized that the consequences of these changes weren't as calamitous as were first anticipated and eventually, they were able to adapt. Today, change can be more dramatic in many ways—it comes faster than ever before, and it requires people to adapt quickly and without much in the way of training. As a result, mid-career professionals may feel that their job is leaving them behind. Let's look at six general trends and their impact on job responsibilities and careers:

1. Constant Technological Breakthroughs

Every day lawyers, doctors, business executives, and other professionals enter their workplaces and read or hear about a new and

improved technology and how it will improve the workplace, making it faster, more efficient, and more productive. Industries, companies, and individuals are being forced to adapt to the digital world.

For instance, many global organization employees have had to transition to managing virtual teams or conducting business through satellite conferencing or online rather than in person. They had to create strong, trusting relationships with colleagues who they see (in the flesh) less often as well as with less than perfect telephone communication skills. For people who are used to one-on-one, face-to-face communication, virtual meetings feel like a loss of interpersonal interaction. They can't read the person's body language or observe his or her facial expressions. Text messaging, excessive amounts of e-mail, automated answering services, and other electronic communications seem like a burden to many mid-career people, even as they are perfectly natural for a younger generation. The information overload delivered by the Internet, combined with the rapidly filling cache of e-mail messages, can overwhelm professionals who are accustomed to a steady but manageable stream of data.

The phenomenon we call “the kindergarten factor” is fascinating to observe. Employees who grew up with computers since kindergarten relish technology. They are curious and adventuresome when presented with new and improved devices, treating them with openness and enthusiasm. Older employees have a more difficult time adapting to all this and integrating the new technology into their daily work routines. Fortunately, this is an easily solved problem when people speak up and ask for technology training or other help. We've found that when mid-career professionals ask for and receive this help, they soon embrace these changes and become comfortable with them.

2. Highly Stressful Work Environments

One reason for premature, mid-career burnout—not to mention early, stress-induced retirement—is the tremendous pressure for performance that organizations are placing on people. Increased global competition, Wall Street investor emphasis on quarterly performance,

as well as rising costs and declining profit margins have all contributed to the pressure professionals feel in their jobs. They are always looking over their shoulder wondering if they will be victims of the next downsizing, and even if they survive it, will they have to do much more work since they will be doing their own jobs plus those of the employees who were fired or retired.

In these highly stressful environments, deadlines are tighter and demands are greater. Promotions are tougher to come by, not only because managerial ranks have been pruned and flattened and fewer higher level jobs exist, but because entire functions have been outsourced—the capstone position that was there for the last 30 years may now be gone.

Due to the stress, people complain that the company has lost its family atmosphere; that loyalty to employees no longer exists; that people play politics to get ahead; that teams are given impossible assignments with no way of succeeding. They say that work has ceased to be fun and they are working more and enjoying it less.

When people tell us gloom and doom stories about their companies, we remind them that as valid as their concerns are, there is a flip side to these negative environmental trends. In a restructured organization, tremendous opportunities exist for people to shape work schedules to their needs—flex time as well as work-at-home options are common. In addition, leaner companies often perform better, which means bigger bonuses and pay raises. And finally, many of these corporate cultures have loosened up as they've been restructured—dress codes have been eased, decision-making has been pushed downward, and people are promoted based more on merit than on politics.

3. Diversity Challenges

Baby boomers have been brought up to embrace diversity. What they struggle with, however, is the reality of the diversity they face every day in the workforce. As most people have come to learn, natural tensions exist between people who come from different countries, who are of different ages, and who have different backgrounds.

Older people don't relish working for a younger boss, and younger bosses are sometimes threatened by older workers. Managing the petty squabbles in teams and other groups caused by heterogeneous composition can be a hassle. Tensions between functions, especially on cross-functional teams, can be an even bigger problem.

Diversity challenges go beyond age, race, gender, and function. As organizational structures have changed and grown more complex, diversity issues have arisen between home office and the field, U.S. headquarters and foreign subsidiaries, and staff and line departments. People are no longer sure where their allegiance lies in an era of matrixed organizations and multiple or ambiguous reporting relationships.

At mid-career, many professionals feel as if their rightful place in the company has been usurped by younger people or individuals of a different gender, or even employees from another department or country. There is a sense that they are no longer in control, perhaps because their company has been acquired by a larger, overseas organization, because the new CEO decided that Finance or Technology will drive decisions, or because a new HR leader is pushing the organization to hire more women and minorities.

The upshot of these three factors may be the BBRF syndrome: some mid-career professionals are bored since they aren't favored with new, fresh assignments or given the opportunity to get ahead, and thus are locked into a job and career routine. Others burnout from being given more work than ever before and having to deal with more conflict and tension than in the past. Still others lose their jobs because they don't seem to be able to keep up technologically, or because the company is restructuring. And finally, some middle-aged people decide to retire and opt out of what they see as a confusing and chaotic environment or leave because they've been offered retirement incentives they can't refuse.

The good news is, while your company may not value the mid-career segment, others do, especially the companies that embrace knowledge management. They recognize that mid-career professionals have accumulated a huge amount of tacit knowledge that departs with them when they walk out the door. Therefore, these

organizations are often open to hiring mid-career people who know how to get things done.

4. Outsourcing/Consulting

As we alluded to earlier, outsourcing has replaced entire functions at some companies. Outside consultants have also replaced some of the advisors and services that used to be found in-house. At first, outsourcing was confined to specialized areas such as payroll and manufacturing-related functions. Over time, though, everything became fair game for outsourcing. Understandably, mid-career professionals were dismayed when they saw entire departments replaced by outside firms. They also saw and continue to view outsourcing as a threat to their existence.

We encourage our clients to consider outsourcing as a way for them to capitalize on their years of experience and expertise. While working as a consultant or for a smaller, outside service firm isn't for everyone, many mid-career professionals are ideally qualified for this new career direction. Having been on the inside for years, they understand what organizations require from their suppliers. In fact, many organizations prefer hiring firms run by people who have been on the inside, knowing that they appreciate the nuances involved in how a given function operates.

Again, taking advantage of this trend rather than feeling victimized by it requires a shift in consciousness. Mid-career people may have never considered life outside of a large organization previously, and so they don't see themselves as working for or starting their own outside business. They should at least consider this opportunity, though, since they are in a good position to take advantage of it.

5. Episodic Careers

This is a subtler shift than the previous one, but it is no less significant. Increasingly, people are making huge changes in their careers. We're not referring merely to a change from working for a big company to a small one or moving from sales to operations. Instead, what

we're seeing are people moving from business to social work, from banking to teaching, from being a law firm partner to opening a home remodeling business. In some instances, they're not only making a big career change once, but twice.

This trend has been fueled in part by a cultural shift in how work and careers are defined. The old notion of working for one company for life is a thing of the past. Similarly, we are no longer locked into the belief that we were born to do one thing and one thing only. We live in a time where numerous educational institutions welcome part-time, older students who want to learn new subjects, and where workshops and seminars retrain people for new careers. We've seen people who have made a great deal of money in one career decide to pursue another career that is more emotionally than financially rewarding. At the same time, we've also noted those who worked in not-for-profit professions early on, then came up with great ideas for money-making businesses and decided to pursue them. Our culture gives permission to people who want to make these significant career changes.

Given that we're living and working longer, it makes sense that this trend has taken hold. Too often, though, baby boomers are overlooking the possibilities this trend holds, in part because they can't imagine, as one of our clients put it, that "this dog can learn new tricks." People need to get past the old notion that one career defined them. They need to recognize that some people were born to do more than one thing, and sometimes even two or three things.

6. Premature Endings

People are leaving the workforce at a younger age today than in the past. Some are leaving involuntarily while others are taking advantage of sizable benefits packages. Whatever the reason, these early retirees are often highly skilled professionals who are financially secure and also possess the energy and desire to do something different.

However, the myth of retirement in our society is powerful. For years, retirement has been perceived as a goal, a nirvana of easy

living and fun. As a result, people who find themselves retired at 50 or 60 think to themselves, “I’m lucky; I can afford to do nothing the rest of my life; I should relax and enjoy it.” If this is the case, they should enjoy it and not feel guilty or embarrassed. Some people, though, don’t want to relax. They retain the drive and ambition to pursue unrealized career goals. They like being employed, having a place to go in the morning and being around people. They have the resources to start their own business in pursuit of these goals or to go back to school to master a new body of knowledge and start over. These paths are only possible, though, if people stop dismissing them as pipedreams.

In the following chapters, we’re going to examine these and other opportunities that have emerged in recent years and suggest ways to capitalize on them. For now, though, let’s meet a mid-career professional who is suffering from burnout caused by the changes that have taken place in his particular field.

STUCK IN THE DOLDRUMS

Dan, 53, is a human resources manager for a large, public corporation. Throughout the company, he is known as someone who has great rapport with employees and line managers, and for years he has been the company point person when it comes to counseling employees on careers and performance issues. His empathy and insight has helped the company retain key employees as well as develop those who might otherwise have become stuck.

Dan isn’t bored with his job, but he finds himself frustrated and under stress because of ongoing change—especially change involving information technologies. Every day seems to bring a new piece of software to master, a virtual meeting to attend, or the transfer of paper tasks to computerized ones. Dan has a boss who is 7 years his junior, and he is especially irritated by her love affair with the new technology and her insistence that he acquire computer skills that he currently lacks. For instance, when his boss suggests that Dan put his calendar online to facilitate scheduling, Dan resists. He tells her it feels like an invasion of his privacy; he also doesn’t want to invest the

time necessary to learn how to use the calendar program. Though his boss lets him slide on this issue, she insists that he attend a computer training session she recommends. Though he gives in, he resents it and tells others in his department that the training is a waste of time.

The tension between Dan and his boss escalates as they clash over one new requirement after another. Finally, Dan's boss calls him into her office and warns him that if he doesn't adapt to the changing environment his job will be in jeopardy. Dan wants to tell her he quits, but he can't afford to do so for another 5 years. As a result, he grudgingly accommodates his boss' requests, but he loses his zest for his work as well as his effectiveness. He is burned out, and he is just putting in his time until he has enough money to get out.

Think about Dan's situation for a moment before we tell you the outcome. Do you believe he was a victim of changing times? Or do you think that he was too stubborn for his own good?

Like many mid-career professionals who have enjoyed a measure of success doing things a certain way, Dan was disturbed when the changes in his environment seemed to be a hindrance rather than a help. When he protested these changes and his boss refused to be swayed, he felt as if his opinion no longer mattered. When his boss gave him an ultimatum, he felt angry and fearful. All these feelings contributed to a sense of burnout. One of the most insidious aspects of burnout is that it makes people think that the best they can hope for in a job is survival, and Dan shared this belief. As a result, he didn't even consider his options when his boss issued her threat because he didn't believe he had any. For a number of months, all Dan could do was feel sorry for himself and angry at his boss, going through the motions and displaying little of the emotional intelligence that had helped him be a strong HR person.

When we began working with Dan, it was clear that this was a talented, accomplished individual who could still thrive in a top HR job. In a burned out condition, unfortunately, people are so stressed that they fail to perceive this possibility. All they think they're capable of is getting by and then getting out.

Working with Dan, we had him do three simple things. First, we set up a few informational interviews with HR executives at other

companies. Through these interviews, Dan began to grasp that just about every HR department had experienced a technological transformation, and that his situation was not unique; that his boss was not out of line when she tried to improve his technological literacy. Second, we coached Dan on the need to be flexible. We told him that he didn't need to change his values, but that if he wanted to thrive in a new organizational environment, he had to stop being so rigid in response to new policies and procedures. Third, we encouraged him to do as his boss suggested—take courses and work hard at becoming technologically proficient.

Because there was a lot of bad blood between Dan and his boss, he decided to apply for other jobs. The three actions he had taken reenergized him, and he began sending out his resume and working his extensive network of colleagues. He was soon hired by one of his employer's competitors. Though it took a few months for Dan to adapt to the new culture, he made a successful transition primarily because he did what he needed to do: become technologically proficient.

The lesson of Dan's story is that mid-career professionals must resist the feeling that their time has passed and that there's nothing they can do to remedy their burnout—or whatever negative feelings have caused them to be stuck. They should recognize that inaccurate self-perceptions are often caused by environmental changes and that they have the ability to adjust.

Whether you're 40, 50, or 60, you probably are in a good position to adapt to whatever changes are impacting your career and take advantage of them. The first step in this process, though, is to be aware if you're suffering from BBRF syndrome.

AN ASSESSMENT TOOL

All of us at some point in our careers feel bored or burned out. Many of us have been fired and some of us contemplate early retirement. None of this is unusual or harmful to our careers. It becomes harmful, however, when we respond to any or all of these factors by

shutting down or sinking into a funk, especially at mid-career. At this point in our careers, we are vulnerable to cynicism and apathy. We may feel we lack the energy and optimism that we possessed in our twenties or thirties. If we're fired, we think we deserve it or that we'll never find another job. We see retirement as our only option. We can't handle the changes that are occurring in our companies, industries, and careers in general, and so we basically give up or just try to get by.

Does this sound like you? To assess whether the BBRF syndrome is affecting you and your career, answer the following questions:

1. Do you find yourself weary of dealing with new employees coming and going constantly, or that you have little in common with colleagues who are of different ages and backgrounds?

2. Do you find yourself watching the clock when you're at work and feeling like it's your worst, most boring class when you were in school; has work stopped feeling like fun at least some of the time and now really feels more like work?

3. Have you recently been fired, and are you convinced that you were fired because you're older, because you no longer fit in or because your new boss simply didn't like you or was threatened by you?

4. If you're out of work for any reason, do you believe that you'll never find another job, or that people won't hire you because of your age?

5. Are you retired or planning to retire soon even though you don't want to because retirement seems like your only option, or because you feel you are no longer valued by your company?

6. Has your demeanor at work changed in recent years? Do you find yourself snapping at people frequently or displaying impatience in some other way, are you often irritated with bosses, direct reports, or colleagues, or are you tired and lethargic in the middle of the day for no good reason?

7. Do you resist changes in processes and policies that you believe will diminish your effectiveness and prevent you from receiving a promotion or good performance review?

8. Is your professional self-esteem lower than it has been in the past, or do you believe that other, younger people are passing you by or soon will be?

9. Are you reluctant to consider any career paths besides the one that you've been on for the last 10 or 20 years?

10. Are you intimidated by the new technology, hate virtual meetings, or resist or rebel against new technological systems?

11. Has the increased stress in your job made you cynical and pessimistic? Do you frequently talk about the "good old days" and complain that your organization's leadership no longer cares about their people?

12. Do you find that you're unwilling or unable to do anything to shake yourself out of your work torpor, that you're content to just go through the motions in order to collect your paycheck, or do you avoid stretch assignments or any type of work challenges?

Assess your "yes" responses to the questions as follows:

0–3 yes responses: Unlikely to be afflicted by BBRF Syndrome

4–6 yes responses: Moderately vulnerable to BBRF Syndrome

7–9 yes responses: Likely to have BBRF Syndrome

10–12 yes responses: Mired in BBRF Syndrome

GET YOUR HEAD OUT OF THE PARADIGMS

Time and again, our clients who are suffering from mid-career malaise have work views that are mired in the past. To a certain extent, this is to be expected. After all, you were taught certain truths about work and careers, they were valid for many years, and it's only natural to assume that they still are valid. Actually, it's only natural if you don't submit these truths to some hard analysis. You're going to resist change rather than adapt to it unless you recognize the paradigms for what they are: verities from a bygone era.

Consider, therefore, the following five paradigms from the past and whether you still believe they govern your job effectiveness and career success:

1. *The most important thing is to be true to myself.* This is a noble concept, and we would encourage you to be true to deeply held beliefs and values. Some baby boomer professionals, however, use this paradigm as a justification for their myopic viewpoints. They refuse to consider a new manufacturing process or a change in business strategy because “that’s not the way we do things around here.” They convince themselves that it’s wrong to downsize or that global expansion is the type of risk their mentors taught them to avoid. People need to be true to the values and rules of a rapidly changing marketplace, and clinging to outdated business beliefs sets you up for failure.

2. *Old dogs don’t learn new tricks.* How many times have you said or thought the following: “I’ve been successful doing things one way for years. I’m too old to change now and learn something new.” Learning is critical for everyone who wants to have a successful career. Whether you’re 30 or 60 or 70, your success and happiness are dependant on how quickly you climb new learning curves. Many new kinds of information, products, services, and entertainment bombard us daily, and we must be curious about this barrage and willing to try and master it (rather than be overwhelmed). Knowledge management has become a buzz word for a reason. If you expect your old knowledge to sustain your career, you’re sadly mistaken.

3. *Life is fair.* Talk to a twenty-something in your office and ask him or her if life is fair. The response will be: Are you nuts?!?!? Most young people recognize that we live in a chaotic, volatile world where all their good work can be blown up in an instant. If you’re a baby boomer, on the other hand, you probably were taught that if you worked hard and got results, you’d be rewarded. Certainly hard work often is rewarded. Sometimes, however, hard work and top performance are ignored. An acquisition or change of management can cause you to fall out of favor in an instant. In a fast-changing

environment, your 20 years of dedication and superior results may count for nothing. This fact shouldn't make you angry or frustrated. Instead, recognize that while organizational life may not be fair, it also offers more and faster opportunities for advancement than in the past. The stigma of being fired or changing jobs frequently has largely disappeared. One bad reference from a boss who dislikes you won't ruin your career. People are more open-minded about different work styles and more tolerant of failure. In short, you can sink fast in one environment, but whatever failures or problems you've experienced probably won't stop you from advancing in a new job or a new career. Therefore, the new paradigm is: Life isn't fair, but it is more forgiving than in the past.

4. *With experience comes wisdom.* A corollary of this paradigm is with experience comes seniority, security, and promotions. If this is your expectation, you're likely to be disappointed. In our changing world, older employees don't automatically gain respect from their juniors, and workers with seniority aren't necessarily rewarded for their experience and tenure. A significant percentage of your experiences, in fact, are irrelevant or at least tangential to the way business is done now. In a flattened organization driven by technology and teams, your years in a hierarchical structure may not be relevant. Rather than being bitter or depressed because all your experience is no longer useful, you must recognize that some of your experience certainly gives you an edge on younger people. More important, real wisdom comes to those who are agile, who can adapt to new situations and events. You will be rewarded based on your flexibility rather than your years of service.

5. *Everyone should practice the Golden Rule.* Civility and good manners are no longer the norm. In a fast-paced, high-stress environment, people don't always have time to return calls. You may have a boss or a client who speaks rudely to you because he's under deadline pressure. You may have a colleague who breaks a promise he made you or even forgets he made that promise. If you're continuously becoming angry at others who are ill-mannered or inconsiderate in their dealings with you, you're going to burnout fast. If you allow your feelings to be hurt by those who ignore the Golden Rule,

you're going to waste precious time and energy. Developing a thick skin is the new paradigm.

HOW TO PREVENT YOUR CAREER FROM BEING SIDETRACKED BY YOUR "CHANGE REACTION"

If you nodded when you were reading any of the above, join the club. A volatile work environment makes many of us say and do things that are not in the best interest of our careers. Therefore, the next time change makes you say something cynical or act pessimistically about your career, try doing the following:

- *Acknowledge and then get rid of the anger and other negative emotions.* At mid-career, people feel stuck and their emotions can lead them down a negative path. Don't get caught in this trap. It's fine to react emotionally to change, but don't wallow in it. Recognize that sustained anger or other negative emotional states will stifle your job effectiveness and career progress. Even more important, these emotions can put blinders on what can be a positive new experience—a second chance at a new job, new career, or new opportunity within your current organization.

- *Take the high road.* Some mid-career professionals react to a difficult new boss, a mediocre performance review, being downsized, a new management team, or a change in work responsibilities or policies with invective. They confront people, they complain, and they criticize. In short, they burn bridges—bridges that are often necessary to make their next career moves. As unfairly as you feel you've been treated or as stupid as a new policy may appear, work hard at maintaining relationships. Much more so than in the past, it's who you know that counts.

- *Fake it until you make it.* Many mid-career professionals we've worked with have said that they feel like they no longer fit. The new work team structure, the knowledge management initiative, the additional work load, and the new responsibilities all make people feel like novices even though they possess 20 or 30 years experience. If

you appear flustered and uncertain and say you can't do it, that will be people's perceptions. If you don't make a big deal about being a learner, however, you'll probably master a new area faster than you thought possible. As a result, you'll be perceived as a quick study who can handle transitions easily.

- *Maintain your sense of humor.* This is a coping device, and you're going to need to cope with change—having a boss who is many years your junior, starting over in a new field, or moving from the for-profit to the not-for-profit sector. We've found that people who can laugh at their mistakes and their discomfort generally have an easier time emerging from mid-career doldrums.

- *Keep your options open.* Some people are obsessively myopic in their career outlooks. They refuse to consider another employer, another field, starting their own business, volunteering, or 100 other career paths beyond the one they've been on for x number of years. As you'll discover in the next chapter, keeping your options open means increasing the odds that you can capitalize on the opportunities that are proliferating in a changing marketplace.