Re-Working Career Pathways

SUMMARY: The idea that the course of people's professional lives is settled in their twenties is long-outmoded, but employers and life structures have been slow to adapt to this fact. However, organizations are increasingly assisting workers with midlife transitions, such as going back to school, enhancing skills for new career directions, or allowing for reduced hours so that employees can pursue other interests. Such steps create a need to rethink work, education, and social safety nets to accommodate new approaches.

Forecasts

- "Careers for life" may begin to give way to "careers for life stage" as workers and employers realize that time in a job or industry is a finite thing due to changing skills, interests, technologies, and market needs.
- New resources and structures will be needed to support a workforce that retrains or shifts careers regularly. These could range from mid-career use of social safety net funds to rethinking the roles of universities, community colleges, and technical schools.
- Mid-career shifts could help combat workplace ageism as workers retrain and move to jobs where they have interests, rather than lingering in jobs where their skills become obsolete.
- While this change is emerging slowly, it could become supercharged in the medium term by a workforce with generally looser ties or allegiances to organizations than in the past.

Key Uncertainties

Whether evolving views are tied to generation, life stage, or some combination thereof

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Evolution of institutions to support midlife shifts

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Older millennials and their approach to midlife

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In the United States, whether health insurance continues to be tightly coupled to work

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Shifting gender roles vis-à-vis work and family

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Whether midlife career transitions are primarily for elite workers

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Supporting Trends

- **Support organizations.** New organizations are emerging to support workers in mid-career shifts in business and volunteer work.
- **Growth of the blended workforce.** Workforces that "blend" conventional and freelance workers are spreading. A survey found that 93 percent of companies are using a blended workforce.
- **Rapid changes in work.** Rapid changes in work and work skills are forecast by experts and expected by workers due to technological and market forces.
- **Engagement in the workplace.** U.S. workforce levels of engagement—which are tied to work satisfaction and commitment—are rising slowly, from about 30 percent in 2014 to about 35 percent in 2017, with ongoing oscillations.
- **Workforce skills gap.** The U.S. economy has a growing "skills gap" between the skills being demanded by employers and the skills the workforce can provide.

Related Drivers of Change

- 21st-Century Guilds
- Aging World
- Work Redefined
- Bifurcated Workforce
- The Next-Gen Professionals

Notable Data Points

MINDING THE GAP

39% of U.S. employers report difficulty filling jobs
due to a lack of available talent.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016 Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey

STARTUPS: AN OLDER PERSON'S GAME

The average age of startup founders is nearly 42
and, among the startups with highest growth,
the **average age of founders is 45.**

Source: The National Bureau of Economic Research, Age and High-Growth Entrepreneurship

MILLENNIALS THE LARGEST GENERATION

In 2016,
millennials became America's largest living generation,
surpassing boomers (74.9 million)
as they reached 75.4 million.

Source: Pew Research Center

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Strategic Insights

- The institutions—social, educational, financial—needed to support mid-career shifts are currently lacking or rudimentary at best. This provides associations with a tremendous opportunity to provide some of this support.
- Associations could ally with organizations—such as the Distinguished Careers Institute or the Transition Network—that have sprung up to assist people with midlife transition and career issues.
- Currently, expectations and career structures generally link career stage with life stage. Going forward, there will be a need to rethink the mechanisms that enable and support career shifts—school loans, retirement plans, healthcare—and to uncouple these mechanisms from age so that mid-career shifts can be realized.
- Since the boundaries of industries and professions are becoming more permeable, the associations that support them will need to as well.
- A culture that gives more permission for mid-career shifts could be a boon for midlife workers starting out from a non-professional background, transitioning from full-time parenthood, etc.
- As older workers shift into early career jobs in new fields, there will be a reversal of the mentor/mentee paradigm—at least regarding age—with younger, more experienced workers mentoring older, less experienced ones. There is a role for associations in helping to derive appropriate training and best practices that mitigate any age-based conflict that could arise from this reversal.
- New flexibility around full-time vs. part-time and around breaks in work for retraining or pursuing other priorities will be needed as mid-career shifts are pursued.

Timing

- **Stage:** Recently emergent and beginning to grow.
- **Speed:** This idea is developing slowly but, depending on millennials' work patterns as they mature, could rapidly accelerate.

Potential Alternative Futures

- **Freelance world:** The idea of set career paths dissolves in the face of the gig economy.
- **(Career) path dependency:** The current structures that define and support work may be too slow to change—or even actively hostile toward it—to allow mid-career shifts to ramp up.
- **It's great if you can afford it:** Without social and financial support, mid-career shifts are limited to those who can afford them, creating a bifurcated workforce of those who are happy with their jobs and those who are stuck in an ill-matched career.

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Take Action

- **Investigate the interaction of career pathways and life stages in your association.** In some fields, the time and preparation required for entry mean that professionals will have to wait until later life stages before their careers take off. Some careers rarely attract people out of college. Other fields regularly lose people at some key stage. Associations need a textured understanding of career pathways to effectively serve members.
- **Champion flexibility to support career changers.** Associations can lower the barriers to entry for career changers. Prior experience can be honored and used to accelerate people through preparation and credentialing. Associations can work to alter cultural expectations by recognizing and applauding non-traditional career paths and increasing online education opportunities that help members fit learning into their work lives. Leaders can advocate for changes in employee benefits and other institutions that make a career redirect possible.
- **Provide an introduction to potential careers.** Membership can be promoted as a way to test drive new careers before making the switch. Associations also could offer introductory courses that provide an overview of the knowledge and skills required and the opportunities available.
- **Help your members plan for aging within their careers.** This may be as simple as helping them keep their skills current or introducing them to alternatives like consulting or businesses they might create. Or the association may find it needs to champion working conditions that keep jobs attractive to people as they navigate different life stages.
- **Promote your association's employment opportunities for career changers.** Associations and nonprofits are attractive places to experience second or third careers. People come with specialty knowledge or an avocation for the field and then learn association management on the job. Associations can also encourage career exploration and offer support for additional training for employees who want to shift roles within the association. Associations can recruit great employees if they are willing to train them.

Keyword Search

To continue researching this change driver, use combinations of these search terms:

midlife, career-shift, returnships, career re-entry, resources for older workers, middle-aged, career, work

Who Will Be Affected

Associations with members in jobs that do not offer a work-life balance or support the demands of different life stages will have a larger number of career changers. All associations, including trade and business associations, need an intimate understanding of their field's career pathways and how the association can attract and serve people ready for a change. Associations typically hire many individuals and career changers who are attracted to the purpose and professional growth available in association management.

About ASAE ForesightWorks

ASAE ForesightWorks is a deliberate, evidence-based research program and emerging line of products to provide association professionals with a *continual* stream of intelligence about the changes facing the association industry, including:

- regularly updated action briefs;
- tools for applying insights from the research in your association;
- guidance in performing environmental scans; and
- opportunities to engage with peers around the research.

Ultimately, the program's mission is to empower association leaders to create a culture of foresight in their associations and to lead their organizations confidently into the future.

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