CHAPTER – II

MID-CAREER CRISIS
REVIEWS OF THE LITERATURE

Section 2.1 of this chapter introduces “Mid-career crisis” and highlights its association with middle managers and strategy process. Section 2.2 discusses the changes in work environment Section 2.3 discusses the careers and their importance. Section 2.4 identifies important stages of male adult development. Section 2.5 discusses the corporate reaction to Mid-career crisis. Section 2.6 explains the integrated career stages suggested by Hall and Super.

The overview of mid-career crisis is presented in the chapter 1. It has covered the broader aspects of strategy formulation and implementation their implications to management of strategy from the perspective of Organizational Behavior and Management Science. This chapter focuses on establishing interrelationship between middle managers and strategy.

2.1 Mid-career crisis

With an increasing complexity of managing people, organizations have faced with issues related to Mid-career crisis. The employees who are into Mid-career crisis will be reappraising one’s accomplishments relative to ambitions and dreams and reexamining the importance of work in one’s own life. This definition points out the consequences of accomplishments falling short of one’s own dreams. This can explain the phenomena of Mid-career crisis. Levinson’s seminal work on adult development can be considered as a base for addressing mid-career crisis related issues.

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As individuals reach the mid-career stage of their life, several factors tend to alter their personal needs, values, and ultimately the performance on the job\textsuperscript{20}. As technology and knowledge proliferate, the half-life of one’s effective career is significantly reduced. For many mid-career workers, reaching a stage of no further advancement, or plateauing is a serious concern.

Mid-career crisis can be triggered by a number of experiences: fear of lost youth and missing opportunities, awareness of ageing and mortality, failure to accomplish significant dreams, inability to achieve an acceptable balance between work and family\textsuperscript{21}.

The human element of organization is argued to be a vital resource for strategy execution\textsuperscript{22}. Dedicated strategies appeared to be executed more effectively when organizations exhibit high level of commitment to their employees\textsuperscript{23}. This point can be further proved from the seminal contributions\textsuperscript{24} of Porter, Hamel and Prahalad\textsuperscript{25} who rigorously argued to prove the gulf between strategy formulation and implementation.

A dedicated and talented work force will act as a valuable resource to help the firms to execute their strategies. What appeared to be lesser known phenomena became a burning issue with evolution of corporations. Talented knowledge workers

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started becoming the victim of mid-career crisis and organizations started losing their human capital. This has far reaching negative implications on strategy formulation and implementation.

The organizations which have flexible work policies facilitate greater engagement of employees in work, strong intentions to remain with the companies, less negative spillover from home to job and better mental health. The study results are based upon the responses of employers rather than employees. The ability of the variables used in the study encompass through important variables governing Mid-career crisis is remarkable\textsuperscript{26}.

Organizations which are committed to their employees wellbeing, can profitably execute their strategies\textsuperscript{27}. This study used sample of employees from textiles, machinery, automotive parts, and electronic component industry in Korea. The study heavily depended on Return on Assets (ROA). There are numerous studies which make use of accounting ratios, to measure human resource planning and overall performance of corporations.

As the nature of work changed, the demand and the need for new set of sustainable skills became inevitable\textsuperscript{28}. This study made an effort to establish relationship between the nature of work and work life. Inability to transform with the unending demand for new soft skills made existing knowledge base obsolete\textsuperscript{29}. As

\textsuperscript{26} National Study of Employers. (2005), Family and Work Institute, New York.
employees feel the risk of becoming a part of non-productive/obsolete work force, they are possessed with burnout syndrome which leads to mid-career crisis. As the organizations move from one stage of transition to another there is a dire need to match human resource to strategies an organization intends to implement\(^\text{30}\).

The mid-career syndrome is hitting today’s mid-career workers harder than their predecessors. Increased longevity, delayed marriages, and large number of two career households have altered family patterns. Recent surveys have revealed that largest decline in job satisfaction was among those aged between 35 and 54\(^\text{31}\). This study used a sample of 7,700 workers. And more than 40% report feelings of burnout. Like adolescence, mid-career restlessness or burned out feeling can be a time of frustration, confusion and alienation but also a time of self-discovery, new directions and fresh beginnings. Today millions of mid-career men and women are fighting with mid-career syndrome-looking for ways to balance job responsibilities. Mid-career crisis is not a universal phenomenon experienced by everyone but a cultural phenomenon experienced by many people in different societies\(^\text{32}\). Every achievement motivated career oriented individual is bound to suffer Mid-career crisis. He argues that the deterioration of company climate, unused knowledge and skill, manpower requirement and change as factors that cause Mid-career crisis. Organization climate is a variable which pin points the shared understanding its employees inherit and its deterioration over a period of time causes crisis. The companies which pay attention to career crisis are willing to invest in to remedial measures when the business booms and will not be able to pay attention when the


The economic conditions and their influence on company’s performance are the interlinked variables which influence the possibility of Mid-career crisis. The paradigm shift in the human resource practices that supports youth and push out older workers need to change as firms are going to face unintended consequences of such decisions. This study emphasizes the need for retaining talented and experienced employees. The career advancement opportunities are motivating factors in the career ladder of an individual. It is necessary to develop in manager some expectation of opportunities in the future in order to keep their motivation high according to Pareek and T V Rao.

The framework developed in the study of Tamara Erickson and Lynda Gatton appears to have addressed Mid-career crisis in a novel way. They have concentrated on the elements of employee engagement that is going to create win-win situations in the organization. Organizations which develop strategies to engage their employees meaningfully will succeed in formulation and implementation of strategic course of action. The employers need to make an attempt to identify possible causes behind Mid-career crisis otherwise they are bound to lose their valuable workers forever.

Organizations inability to design adequate work life policies has resulted in the friction between employees and employers. However policies to promote work life balance have not been universally implemented nor have they addressed employee interests and needs. There is need for symbiotic relationship between

employees and corporations. Studies suggest that people who get stuck in their career are attributable to lack of adequate promotions, obsolete skill sets and inability to balance between work and family life. This leads to gradual loss of interest in work life which leads to underutilization of executive time and skill.

2.2. Changes in Work Environment

Harry Levinson has identified seven factors. These same factors are present today. The environmental pressures regarding age and career stage have been heightened during the era of information economy for the following reasons:

- Increasing interaction of the work hard period.
- Inseparability of life and career.
- Continuous threat of defeat.
- Increase in dependency
- Denial of feelings.
- Constant state of defensiveness.
- Shift in prime of life concept.

Constructs like business strategy, environmental uncertainty, operating technology and culture can be argued as organization-level constructs, whereas Mid-career crisis is an individual level variable. A fundamental question which emerges from this is under what circumstances the response from individual managers can be treated as the valid observation of an organizational phenomenon?

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Snow and Hrebiniak made an attempt to resolve this issue by positioning a relationship between the type of strategy followed and organizational performance and then developed hypotheses using the response of individual managers from multiple functions. This methodology appears to have been accepted well with the members of academia and consulting associated with professional virtual and real intellectual groups like, Academy of Management, Knowledge at Wharton and Harvard Business School Publishing etc.\(^{39}\)

2.3 Careers

A career is the individually perceived sequence of attitudes and behaviors associated with work related experiences and activities over the span of a person’s life.\(^{40}\) This working definition of career is subjective and covers both individual and organizational level interactions which constitute it.

At the organizational level careers are seen as a part of process of a social reproduction whereas at individual level it is seen as a sequence of work role transitions.\(^{41}\) (Gunz, 1989). This study identifies careers as a concept with two different dimensions.

Life Stages Theory\(^{42}\)

Existing accumulated research suggest six characteristics of mid-life transition.


\(^{42}\) Levinson, D and Darrow N C. (1978), *The Seasons of a Man’s Life*, Ballantine books.
First, the middle age has a subtle development texture. A real appreciation of the points rests on recent, even contemporary, research. As late as 1974, a distinguished group of behavioural scientists described “the tremendous neglect of development and socialization in the main adult years, roughly 20-65, in psychology, psychiatry, sociology, and so on.” They conclude: “We speak as though development goes on to age 6, or perhaps to age 18; then there is a long plateau in which random things occur; and then at around 60 or 65 ‘ageing’ begins.

He observes: Like a butterfly, an adult is supposed to emerge fully formed and on cue, after a succession of development stages in childhood. Equipped with all the accoutrements, such as wisdom and rationality, the adult supposedly remains quiescent for another half century or so. While children change, adults only age. A life and career goal seems to vary when people go through different stages of their life.

Second, the period of age 35-43 is most favored as dating the mid-life transition. The time of onset, severity, and duration will vary from individual to individual, however, some persons are hardly affected during this transitional period; some experience a great torment; and most people feel some pangs in the transition. Life experiences at different stages are different and have long lasting impact on an individual.

Third, the transition seems to affect both men and women, coming at roughly the same ages but with some significant differences between the sexes as to mode of onset and coping. Jacques\textsuperscript{43} effectively makes both points: Pattern of transaction seems to be different across gender.

The transition is often obscured in women by the proximity of the onset of changes connected with the menopause. In the case of men, the change has from time been referred to as the climacteric, because of the reduction in the intensity of sexual behavior which often occurs at that time. Psychological needs seem to change at different life stages of individuals.

Fourth, depression is the common toxic reaction to mid-life transition, and it seems to derive from a fact that is chronologically simple but psychologically momentous. “The individual has stopped growing up,” Jacques observes,” and has begun to grow old.” He concludes: The first phase of adult life has been lived. Family and occupation have become established (or ought to have become established unless the individual’s adjustment has gone seriously awry); parents have grown old, and children are at the threshold of adulthood. Youth and childhood are past and gone, and demand to be mourned. The achievement of mature and independent adulthood presents itself as the main psychological task. The paradoxes are that of entering the prime of life, the stage of fulfillment, but at the same time prime and fulfillment are dated. It seems that individual at this stage is looking forward for death or end of all expectations.

The mid-life transition fishes in deep and dark waters, that is to say. Parts of the processes of aging are obvious; other parts may be largely unconscious, influencing the adaptive processes of life when the individual is unaware of them or even denies their influence.
Fifth, evidence strongly implies the criticality of the mid-life transition. Among persons of great accomplishment, for example, many observers have noted that in their middle thirties the prominent often become “beset with misgivings, agonizing inquiries, and a loss of zest.” Jacques concludes that this common crisis can be resolved in three ways. The career of accomplishment may come to an end, as in a drying-up of creative work or even in death. A decisive change in the kind and quality of the accomplishment may occur. For a few, a successful mid-life transition may express itself in a release for the first time of major accomplishments. Much depends on the preparedness of an individual to face mid-life transition.

The transition also seems important for everyman as well. A failure to come to grips with the mid-life transition Jacques notes implies an “impoverishment of emotional life” and may even lead to “real character deterioration.” Other observers chart an even more sorrowful catalogue of the consequences of an ineffective transition. During this period professionals perceive that what they have been doing is no longer fulfilling or important and they have not attained the success in their careers that they expected. It is during this period that careers, as well as marriages, go on the rocks and high rates of alcoholism, depression, suicides, and serious accidents occur. In fact, a peak in the death rate occurs between ages 35 and 40, and some have attributed it to the physical illness that is likely to accompany the emotional shock and severe depression that follow the individual’s perception that he is on an irreversible downward path.

To be sure, many professionals continue to be effective throughout the transition, and some go on to even greater achievements, but the rates are not known.
Sixth, evidence suggests that mid-life phenomena are not peculiar to western civilization. One study, for example, finds basic similarities in the psychology of later life between Lowland Mayans and urban Americans.

2.4 Important Stages of Adult Male Development

Early Adulthood (roughly, ages 20-40)

A transition phase which begins at 16-18 and ends at perhaps 20-24, and sees the individual in the process of leaving the family of origin- a balance between “being in” and “moving out”.

Getting into the Adult World

Begins in the early 20’s and typically extends to the early 30’s, with the focus on building an adult life- “to explore the available possibilities of the adult world, to arrive at an initial definition of oneself as an adult, and to fashion an initial life structure that provides a viable link between the valued self and the wider adult world”.

A “dream” or vision of the future is a central feature of this period for many, often with an occupational focus. Early progress is checked against this dream or vision. Several patterns characterize this period of exploration and choice, including: For many males, a provisional commitment to an occupation and perhaps a marriage with around 30, a transitional period focusing on whether or not to make a deeper commitment to the initial career and marriage choices For some males, a moderate or drastic change about 30 in initial occupation and life structure, which are seen as too constraining. For some males, a transient and unsettled life in the 20’s which leads around 30 to desperate attempts to “get more order and stability into….life”

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44 Levinson, D and Darrow N C. (1978), *The Seasons of a Man’s Life*, Ballantine books.
Settling down

Begins in the early 30’s those who successfully make the transition. This typically occurs by the mid-30’s, or not at all. Includes two central aspects: Order, stability, security, control, “making it”- planning, striving, moving onward and upward. Overall, the individual “makes deeper commitments; invests more of himself in his work, family. And valued interests; and within the framework of this life structure, makes and pursues more long-range plans and goals.

Becoming One’s Own Man

This is a time of peaking and of transition, often beginning in the middle or late 30’s and lasting in cases until the 40’s. The prime feature is a sense of constraint and oppression in work, marriage, and other relationships. Whatever the accomplishments, that is, the individual perceives self as insufficiently his own man. Central features of this striving for new autonomy typically include: A rejection or substantial modification of relationships with “mentors” older colleagues who have been supportive but parental ego-ideals, a process that usually has run its course by age 40.

The choice of some key event or achievement against which the individual will measure his affirmation or devaluation by society or relevant others- a promotion, new job, or some other achievement- which outcome may take 3-6 years to unfold.

Mid-Life Transition45

This is pivotal time between two more stable periods, which period usually peaks in the early 40’s. The transition can be smooth or turbulent. The central issue is the disparity between what has been achieved and what is desired. Related issues involve: bodily decline and the growing sense of mortality, ageing, the emergence and the integration of the “more feminine” aspects of the self.

II Middle Adulthood (roughly, ages 40-60)

Restabilization

At around 45, the Mid-life transition is typically complete and men come to a time of great threat or major development advance.

For those who succeed, this can be a period of great built on the new life structure evolved in the Mid-Life Transition.

III Late Adulthood (roughly, ages 60+)

Models of adult development

There are many theories and models of midlife change. Most significant are those which are developmental in nature, dealing with psychological and cognitive stages of adult development. The age between 35 to 45 years is called “the decline decade”. The decade’s crisis is a response to aging and the realization that all of one’s dreams probably will not come true. The challenge of midlife crisis is the fight against violent mood swings, depression, sexual promiscuity, self-destruction and power chasing.

According to Daniel J Levinson, the middle adulthood period of ages 40 to 65 starts with midlife transition from age 40 to 45. During that transition, the individual must end his/her ties with early adulthood, initiate ties with middle adulthood and resolve certain inner polarities. An individual must deal with the disparity between what he is and what he has dreamed of becoming. Levinson believes that doubting and searching during that period is a normal developmental task.
Changing times have changed the lens with which people viewed careers. The definition of careers is not as clear as they were once. The career stages are now viewed as learning stages. The traditional elements of career stages: exploration of new role, establishing in the new role, mastery and exploration of new roles, and exit into something new reminds altogether a butterfly effect (Levinson, 1996). Levinson called them as the seasons in a person’s life and career.

Hall and Nougaim(1968) identified three stages of career development based upon their research on the executives from AT&T, namely, the establishment, advancement and maintenance. In establishment stage a person is concerned with integrating himself with the system. In advancement stage concern of promotion and achievement dominates. In the maintenance stage the person is nearing the limit of advancement. If the person feels successful in his position then he will help the younger ones. If person feels unsuccessful then he/she may use their power to block their progress.

Super proposed four stages of career—exploration, stabilization, maintenance, and decline. The exploration stage represents the time when different career options are investigated. The stabilization stage involves growth and development of an individual. The maintenance stage features a well-established individual. The stage of decline is represented by the reduction in work roles and preparation for retirement. Hall’s model considers these different stages as not merely lie and career stages, but also as stages of learning. The Mid career corresponds to stabilization stage.

46 Levinson, D and Darrow N C, Klien F, Levinson, M. The Seasons of a Man’s Life, , GoodYear, New York.
To be complete, a model of career development in organizations needs to describe that career from two separate but related perspectives—the career as described by the characteristics and experiences of the person who moves through the organization.

2.6 The Integrative View of Career Stages

The integrative view of career stages suggested by Hall (1976) seems to be complete as it incorporates the variables from earlier models. Hall has identified exploration, establishment, maintenance and decline. Which in turn reflect identity, intimacy, generativist and integrity in the above four stages. This model identifies the maintenance stage as the one in which managers need to balance their expectation at a given career stage and career advancement.

Figure 2.1: Hall’s integrated model of life and career stages B.O.O.P., becoming one’s own person; G.I.A.W., getting in the adult world; S.D., settling down

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These different models can be synthesized graphically as shown in figure above.\textsuperscript{50} The dashed lines and question marks in the figure reflect an unresolved question regarding the mid-career period. This appears to be a time when individual differences may be extremely noticeable. Why do some people continue to grow in midcareer while others enter the maintenance plateau and still other begins to decline?

The studies identified wide variety of factors responsible for Mid-career crisis. The factors include, work policies, employer commitment to employee wellbeing, the nature of work change, company climate, investment in employee training program, orientation towards young workers, career advancement factors, employee engagement, work life tension, frustration, burnout, skill obsolescence, disillusionment with the employer and career disappointment. It is difficult to group dominant factors which ignite Mid-career crisis. Hence there is a need to conduct a scientific study into the factor/ dominant factors behind mid-career crisis.

\textsuperscript{50} Hall D, T. (1976), \textit{Careers In and Out of the Organizations}, Sage publishers, Good year, New york.
Identification of research gaps

The literature study has identified different variables which may cause mid-career crisis. One dimension of the study uses Career anchors from the domain of career development or “Organizational Career Development” (OCD). The variables...
on OCD leads to variables associated with career stages. Hall’s integrated career and learning stages act as a conceptual base for these variables. Second set of variables emerge from the literature of Strategy. The involvement of middle managers in the strategy process of the organization is studied using the variables on strategy research. The two conceptual domains and variables make it difficult to understand which of them are more influential as to lead middle managers into crisis. This needs to be examined so as to identify the variables leading to mid-career crisis. The approaches of Super in identifying life stages is almost similar to that of the model suggested by the Hall. But the approach of Hall appears to have synchronized the impact of career stages and life stages. Further he takes the argument to capture what is known as learning stages. Hall argued that learning and career stages go hand in hand, making this model most popular.

Several research studies have identified factors like skill obsolescence, inability to balance between the work and personal life. Higher stress levels lead to burnout. Linda Gratton suggested the organizational initiatives to tackle career crisis. It appears that there is no consensus among the authors on the variables underlying Mid-career crisis. The literature on strategy is dominated by the Mintzberg’s strategy process research.

The new generation thinking on strategy is more appealing and emergent in nature. Floyd and Wooldridge have extensively researched on middle managers role in the strategy. They have concentrated on actors in the strategic management process. Whether low involvement in career leads to low involvement of strategy? Such
questions are quite important in deciding a causal relationship between careers and organizational strategy. The abstract efforts made by the authors to connect two different levels of analysis through career and strategy. The very nature of complex relationship between the above variables finds lack of consensus among academicians and practicing managers.

This has led to the identification of research gap in this area of study. If explored meaningfully, this phenomenon of mid-career can be explored in the lens of strategy to gain a deeper understanding of the variables concerning the study.