

Lost your mojo?

It is Monday morning, you are on your way to work, having had a great weekend with friends, your absent mind wanders. As you reconnect with the thought of getting into the office, your energy levels go down, you recognise this is not the first time, this has been going on for a few months. You feel lonely. In fact, your partner recently told you that you are snappy and negative. You wonder, is it stress, is it winter melancholia, poor business prospects or a difficult relationship at work which is starting to get under your skin? And why do you ask yourself so many questions, especially when answers do not come easily? Maybe you are entering a new cycle, a new life cycle without knowing it. Some call it a mid-life crisis. This label is denigrating, even stigmatising, at a time when your self-confidence is under attack. It takes resilience to look at all this in the eye, but the cost of ignoring it can be high. So why do we go through the “seasons” of life as Daniel Levinson¹ titled his book to describe these movements?

The normality of life cycles

As young adults starting our new lives, we manage a permanent tension between continuing to explore possibilities of life and creating a stable life structure both financially and emotionally, as we continue the detachment process from our parents. As young adults we work hard at becoming independent in making our life choices, although they are still much influenced by our family, friends and the society in which we grew. As a result, as young adults, we expend a lot of efforts at proving to others that we can thrive as an adult. The pursuit of challenge and achievement are key drivers, especially from a professional perspective.

As we feel we approach the personal and/or professional goals we set for ourselves, we may be exposed to that strange “Monday morning feeling”. We gradually enter a new phase or a mid-life transition. We might come to reassess our achievements, our chosen goals. For some, there is a greater desire for authenticity, reconnecting with neglected parts of oneself and inner desire. This transition can take the form of a moderate change or a deeper more

existential crisis, including depression, depending on the gap between the current state and the original goals that we failed to achieve, or disappointment with what they actually represent. It might be triggered by the realisation suggested by Arthur Brooksⁱⁱ that you may have peaked professionally earlier than you thought. This transition which will spread out over months at its most intense, even years as one re-adjusts, can open up a period of self-authoring as defined by psychologist Bob Keganⁱⁱⁱ. By self-authoring, he means taking the risk and forms of responsibility involved in coming to one's own answers to those hard questions: whose goals have I really been pursuing since leaving home? What, if anything, do I want to readjust? What matters to me most for the next stage of my life? This cycle may repeat itself over one's lifetime. Levinson suggests in his work that the last cycle is when we enter the late adulthood transition, when we come to terms with our life purpose, achievements and disappointments^{iv}. It is often characterised by revisiting significant relationships around us, for example thoughts about legacy and mentoring can be triggered during this stage.

21st century style transitions

The notion of career has changed, from a single-lifelong career to multi-career life. Partly because of the financial crisis, many professionals above a certain age, often in their 50s, have felt increasing job insecurity. Because these professionals live longer and healthier, they have a growing need or even desire to extend their working life and explore career change. Having a post career, not just a portfolio of professional activities, will increasingly become the norm for many executives before finally retiring.

A few years ago, I undertook a study of partners careers in international law firms. Many partners shared with me in interviews how they were looking for a new motivation professionally, finding it challenging to imagine spending another decade doing the same. For some, the growing feeling was "is this it"? In fact this article was triggered by a recent discussion with a client of mine who told me he did not want the next step, become the CEO of his logistics company, when everyone including his CEO boss thought he was the most suitable candidate. Unless he could find more personal meaning in taking on the CEO job, he just was not motivated by taking on more responsibility.

Some of the younger generations will also face a new form of transition. Many no longer want to replicate the model of their parents in choosing between career and family but trying to reconcile both and, in addition, have a more meaningful impact on our planet, whether social or environmental. They should be praised for that, but it raises the expectations bar ever higher as they enter fully into adulthood and bring closer the prospect of facing the question: “did I get all I wanted”? This trend might explain why increasingly professionals in their late 30s or early 40s rather than 50s experience the first symptoms of a mid-life transition.

The value of entering a new life cycle

A mid-life transition brings an opportunity for an alignment between a reconnected sense of who we are, our purpose and what we do. Life cycles are often perceived to be largely belonging to the private domain. Organisations pay little attention to this, when in fact it has a major impact on work motivation. Life cycles do not fit in well into structured career paths. There is an understandable unease about getting involved into something so personal as a life cycle, if it is ever recognised as such. Yet it should be acknowledged that personal and professional growth is not linear. There is a need to re-validate why we work on a regular basis, especially at executive levels when status and the perception of having reached the top of the organisation, high level of compensation, length of service, all reinforce the assumption that “all is fine”. For organisations, creating a more reflective space on one’s career may risk opening Pandora’s box and triggering unanticipated career changes. However, my experience of running career reflection programmes is that they often lead to healthier relationships between a professional and the organisation, stimulating an essential dialogue on how to better align the future needs of the organisation and the untapped ambition of its executives.

From crisis to transition

At an individual level, it is important to understand that you are entering a transitional space, between a past and future state. However unpleasant it can feel, the time it takes should not be compressed; one has to learn to stay in the transition, that is where new

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insight and learning is to be gained. William Bridges also described such a transition as a “neutral zone”^v, a moment of ambivalence, even doubt, as you want to return back to the comfort of your “old self”. Demotivation is also normal as it is hard to experiment with something different and new, yet this is a pre-condition to new development and change. It is a process of unlearning the old and experimenting the new, when you create meaning from what you are experimenting with. Entering the neutral zone can allow you to reconnect with who you really are, for a while detaching yourself from the professional or even your “social” persona which shapes a lot of who we are, so much that we find it hard sometimes to exist outside “what we do”, “who we are expected to be” and not just “who we deeply are”.

So, what are the ways to cope with questions that are deeper and more persistent than usual?

- Acknowledge and name the difficulty with trusted relationships to avoid its solitary dimension and to create meaning from the situation. Life cycles are valuable mental health checks.
- Observe the weak signals and how the state of dissatisfaction has value because it heightens your senses and awareness of things you no longer noticed or just passively accepted.
- Experiment with your intuition and give it time, creating new purpose and adjusting, if that is what you need, takes time, it also requires to accept you are in a vulnerable state, which is part of the transitional space.

Finally, you may need to accept that you may come full circle, to where you started, personal congruence is more important than the destination, and you should feel it through regained energy levels and sense of self-worth.

ⁱ The seasons of a man’s life, Daniel Levinson, Random House Publishing, 1978.

ⁱⁱ Your professional decline is coming (much) sooner than you think, Arthur C Brooks, The Atlantic, July 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ How the way we talk can change the way we work, Bob Kegan, Jossey-Bass, 2001.

^{iv} Same as i above

^v Transitions – making sense of life changes, William Bridges, Perseus Book Group, 2004.