The most exalting moments in a journey for a traveller or a sailor are either when the journey is flagged off in best of spirits and high hopes, or when the destination is reached and a sense of accomplishment sinks in. However, the situations that unnerve are probably the times when the travellers find themselves in the middle of nowhere and are too confounded by challenges, or are too overwhelmed to understand whether it was a wrong decision to have started in the first place or should they end the journey right there.

The analogy can very well be related to a professional who might have pinned high aspirations to his career growth plans while climbing up the ladder, however, loses his way in the middle and starts feeling disillusioned while marching ahead. As per a survey done in the UK, mid-career crisis has started hitting people as early as 35 years of age. And, in one of the features published in a journal of American Psychological Association, it has been mentioned that no other time in life is as plagued with misinformation as the middle age. This should probably ring a bell for the professionals who have lost a sense of purpose in their current roles.

Stressors under a scanner
A corporate professional in his 30s, apparently well-settled, suddenly one day realizes that he is not too happy with his mundane job, and has the potential to contribute much more than simply dig into the figures and statistics while sitting in his ivory tower the entire day. Albeit, he has a family to fend for, however, the urge to explore the road less travelled compels him to leave his high salaried job and start another journey afresh. His career story can either take a positive turn or reach a dead-end if he simply reacts to his impulses. This is what makes it necessary to understand the phenomenon of mid-career crisis strikes.
crisis better to approach the urge rationally.

A research by Genera Insight, Gartner, Forrester, the Society for Human Resource Management and others, sheds light on how age has become a highly critical factor in managing the generation mix at the modern day workplace. Seema Nambiar, Senior Director - People Resources Hardcastle Restaurants Private Limited, also relates the complexity associated with managing multi-generational workforce to mid-career crisis. “The advent of Gen-Y and Gen-Z in the workforce has raised many questions in the mind of the Gen-X and baby boomers. Just the way Gen-Y is constantly delving deeper into the details for everything and Gen-Z has grown in an environment of constant connectivity, the Gen-X and baby boomers also are intrigued as to why cannot they too afford to have as many options. Keeping too many choices in the platter due to a multi-generational influence, along with a high burnout rate probably are some of the factors for professionals to feel the heat of mid-career crisis.” As she further mentions, financial stability after a point of time also lets people take the call of starting afresh.

However Miral Sharma*, an IT professional, and an alumni of one of the premium engineering colleges in India, got an opportunity to travel across geographies because of his job. Yet one day, he suddenly realized that he rather wanted to be involved in something where he could give back to the society. So he decided to quit his job to join an NGO. He also mentions that working in the IT sector was not satisfying, and he eventually thought that the industry was not meant for him. The high burnout rate in the IT industry has also been often mentioned in various researches, which simply aggravates the situation.

Oftentimes, there are sector-specific nuances to be considered so as to understand mid-career crisis better. For instance, Hamsaz Vasunia, Head Business HR, DCB Bank, shares some examples specific to the banking sector. “Largely, most of the professionals in the banking sector would get promoted on the basis of technical skills. However, moving forward they require leadership and management skills as much, and the lack of these skills probably creates a glass ceiling for them,” she says. For instance, jobs in operations, credit and compliance are very niche roles for which the

WHAT HR CAN DO

According to Jacob, employee engagement surveys, organizational climate scores, 360 degree feedback, skip level meetings, water cooler gossips, are some mechanisms which will provide HR the early warning signs. It is the responsibility of a good HR manager to identify such situations and take corrective action at the earliest.

➢ By having a career dialogue with professionals and understanding their aspirations is a simple but effective method.

➢ Employees can be mentored to cope up with overwhelming situations - for e.g., mentoring a technocrat who has suddenly transited into a people management role.

➢ For some professionals, such crisis might arise out of poor Emotional Quotient. Psychological counselling can be very useful for handling professionals with poor EQ.
professionals require an in-depth understanding, as these are technical roles. “Yet, the professionals after several years of experience in their domain face mid-life crisis as they fail to grow beyond a point,” she further adds.

Similarly to what Nambiar mentions, the hospitality sector also makes the workforce too habitual of staying at the front-end and staying connected with the customers such that they cannot understand their significance and relevance beyond that. This combined with factors such as not being able to spend time with the family because of working over weekends, further adds to the frustration leading to a myopic vision and frequent switching of jobs in search of job satisfaction.

Interestingly, there are some sectors where the core people are not as prone to mid-career crisis. Jacob Jacob, Chief People Officer, Apollo Hospitals Enterprises Ltd, counts medical field as one of them. “In the healthcare industry, we rarely come across such cases, may be because the job is very fulfilling - you can make a difference in the lives of people through your profession,” he says and adds, “Career growth also has a reinforcing relationship with years of experience - especially with doctors who become more sought after with more years they practice.”

So, the nature of the job arguably creates an impact on the professionals when despite putting long hours of work, they don’t see a career roadmap ahead of them or they can’t relate themselves to the larger picture to derive job satisfaction.

Resolving the crisis
Transforming any sort of challenge into an opportunity requires more than just wisdom and will power. It needs a methodical approach wherein the results are measured, and it is ensured that the goal is closer with each step. Dr John Demartini, eminent American author, researcher, and behaviour specialist has talked about converting mid-career crisis into an opportunity for the self at an individual level. According to him, interviewing the self, expanding horizons, making plans, reinventing roles and introspecting for readiness to change, helps to look for solutions.

However, the onus to avoid mid-career crisis in professionals can somewhere be also attributed to the organizations and leadership. At DCB Bank, ‘Grow with Us’ is one such initiative which ensures that the employees don’t feel stagnated as far as career growth is concerned.

**BECOMING YOUR OWN LEADER**

Many are bitten by the entrepreneurship bug and that urges them to leave their current job. However:

> Adil says that an employee who wants to be an entrepreneur can be helped by the organization to set up shop as a service provider to the same company, or transfer to roles with P&L accountability. The years of experience and understanding of the organization go a long way in adding value.

> While Nambiar warns that entrepreneurship may not be a cakewalk. At an individual level, one should be sure of his potential and prepare a roadmap before taking the plunge.
Employees across hierarchies get a fair chance to be coached for six months for any opportunities that arise within the organization. 'Career First', another initiative under the umbrella of 'Grow with Us' addresses the issue of mid-career crisis in a more targeted manner. "Herein, the industry veterans are facilitated with counseling sessions and psychometric assessments, which helps them chalk out their career roadmaps and discuss their concerns and apprehensions," says Vasunia. "A customized career plan is created for each on the basis of their experience and skills. Even recently, large number of seasoned professionals have benefitted from this program. Probably, other organizations might also offer career roadmaps to individual employees; however, we try to make it more interactive, which adds to the uniqueness of the program." Additionally, an opportunity to self-nominate themselves for promotions further helps the seasoned professionals at DCB bank. It goes without saying that after so many years of continuous service they not only expect but deserve the promotion," as Vasunia also agrees. "Additionally, since these professionals are little low on their morale, proper recognition also meaningfully engages them," she adds.

A survey by Shine.com highlighted how an MBA degree can help avoid mid-career crisis in professionals. Recounting an example, Nambiar shares how a Regional Director at McDonald’s is now about to complete his MBA with organizational support, and even gets 10 days off every quarter to attend his classes. She further mentions that even the front-end workforce is also constantly involved in project management so as to prepare themselves for leadership roles in future. This works best in the younger employees and assistant managers.

THE TELLING SIGNS

Some HR leaders opine that there is no magic wand to make out the mid-life crisis dilemma in employees, however, some of the telling signs can be:

- Dipping levels of productivity
- Behavioural issues
- Inability to visualize a career roadmap for oneself

...
as the senior segment of the workforce is rather averse to change.

Additionally at Apollo hospitals, a tie-up with XLRI for a one year General Management Program helps the associates to get relevant educational inputs to function as effective managers. As Jacob shares, few of their associates who are heading operations at the hospitals started their career as assistants.

On the other hand, the situation can be still worse for the organization if the managers and leaders are themselves caught in mid-career crisis as they would create a negative influence all over. Saba Adil, Head Of Talent, Aegon Religare Life Insurance, shares her insight, "Managers who have hit mid-career crisis may block growth in the ladder where they're unsure of their next, not adding value and leading to team resentment, attrition and low productivity. Companies need to increasingly engage with the mid-level employees as they play a pivotal role in creating the ecosystem that offers ample opportunities and up-skilling to employees."

Adil further adds why solutions lie more in the behavioural changes rather than in systems and processes. Shaking people out of their comfort zone is not easy and behavioural shifts take time to mature. "The idea is to be proactive rather than reactive," she says.

Simply creating career development programs might not help HR to avoid this form of disillusionment in employees. They need to adopt more focused and personalized approach to understand how bad is the situation and take measures accordingly.

Looking beyond the obvious
There are multiple perspectives that need to be looked into to understand why the mid-career crisis affects the bigger picture. Organizations cannot view it as just another disengagement issue. The seriousness of the same can be understood only when we relate it to the impact it creates on business. "Demographically, most of your workforce is under the age of 35, so you just can’t let go of the experience. BRIC countries (Brazil, India, Indonesia, China and Russia) are all facing these issues where they have a lot of younger people coming into the workforce and a lot of older guys moving out of the workforce, hence the balance is missing. So you might end up with a very youthful organization that in a tough environment will take very foolish decision," explains Nambiar.

Further, as Vasunia rightly mentions probably very soon, it would be the Gen-Y who would face the mid-career crisis when in a bid to fast track careers, they will be given more and more responsibilities and they would not be able to meet the job demands as effectively. The challenge for the HR in both the cases is to balance the equations, whether it is the Gen-Y being flooded with opportunities or Gen-X being frustrated with the lack of opportunities.

Conclusively, employers and employees tend to get involved in the vicious circle of lack of opportunities, failure to build competency, lack of exposure and relevant job roles which adds on to the dilemma of mid-career crisis. At the individual level, job changes and stress management can help as per a feature published in the American Psychological Association. Also, forward thinking employers will also acknowledge that although they cannot stop an employee to take an ultimate call in life if they are too disengaged in their current jobs, however, they can come up with proper employee safety measures to stay aware of the situation well in time to handle the situation better.

It is high time that organizations stop jeopardizing their own bottom line by only focusing on top performers and avoiding the challenges that their non-performers might be grappling with which is disengaging them; and mid-career crisis happens to be one of the multiple forms of disengagement.