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## Managing Middlescence

by Robert Morison, Tamara Erickson, and  
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Burned-out, bottlenecked, and bored. That's the current lot of millions of midcareer employees. In our research into employee attitudes and experiences, we heard many stories of midcareer restlessness, a phenomenon we call *middlescence*. There was the manager who was beginning to realize that he'd never become the company president, the senior executive who felt that she had sacrificed her life—and her spirit—for her job, and the technician who was bored stiff with his unchallenging assignments. Typical is the case of one productive and well-respected middle manager in his late forties. He was sandwiched between obligations at the office and at home, and his work group was demoralized after two rounds of downsizing. The company's structure had flattened, leaving fewer possibilities than ever for promotion, and he felt stalled. "This isn't how my life and career were supposed to play out," he told the employee counselor. "I don't know how much longer I can cope."

Like adolescence, middlescence can be a

time of frustration, confusion, and alienation but also a time of self-discovery, new direction, and fresh beginnings. Today, millions of midcareer men and women are wrestling with middlescence—looking for ways to balance job responsibilities, family, and leisure while hoping to find new meaning in their work.

Midcareer employees—those between the ages of 35 and 54—make up more than half the workforce. One in four has managerial or supervisory responsibility. When in June 2004 we at Age Wave and the Concours Group conducted a survey with Harris Interactive of more than 7,700 U.S. workers, we found that people in this age bracket work longer hours than their older and younger counterparts, with 30% saying they put in 50 or more hours per week. Yet only 43% are passionate about their jobs, just 33% feel energized by their work, 36% say they feel that they are in dead-end jobs, and more than 40% report feelings of burnout.

Midcareer employees are the least likely to say that their workplace is congenial and fun or that it offers ample opportunity to try new

things. As a group, they have the lowest satisfaction rates with their immediate managers and the least confidence in top executives. Only one in three agrees that top management displays integrity or commitment to employee development, and one in four often disagrees with the organization's policies on important employee matters. A fifth are seeking opportunities in other organizations, and a similar percentage are looking for a major career change. But 85% believe that career changes are very difficult these days. Family and financial pressures outside work make them conservative in their career choices, and many cannot afford moves that would involve cuts in pay or benefits. Other research has yielded similar findings: According to a 2005 Conference Board survey, the largest decline in job satisfaction over the past ten years occurred among workers between the ages of 35 and 44, and the second largest decline was among those aged 45 to 54. In short, far too many midcareer employees are working more, enjoying it less, and looking for alternatives.

### The Problems

Middlescent restlessness isn't new, but it plays out differently in different generations. It seems to be hitting today's midcareer workers harder than it hit their predecessors. Increased longevity, delayed (and multiple) marriages, and large numbers of two-career households have altered family patterns such that middlecents are often sandwiched at home between raising children and caring for aging parents precisely at the time when their job responsibilities are peaking. Increased longevity also means that the average 50 year old today could be looking forward to 30 years or more of healthy, active life. That can be a blessing—time enough to learn new skills, start another career, build an entrepreneurial business, or shift priorities to give back to society. Or it can be a curse—for those without the financial resources to chart their own course, who instead face the prospect of having to work indefinitely at a job they don't really enjoy. Either way, it's a problem for their current employers.

Generationally, most of today's (and all of the older) midcareer employees are baby boomers, their values forged in the midst of the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the civil rights and women's rights movements. In middlecence many are asking themselves: Have I

had the impact I expected to have? How can I make the next phase of my life as meaningful as possible? Earlier generations looked to their work for security and material success; the way to combat restlessness was usually to hunker down and focus on one's current job. Many of today's idealistic yet frustrated boomers have different goals—they'd be willing to trade some of their current success for greater significance in their lives and work, even if that means doing something altogether different.

Companies are ill-prepared to manage middlecence because it is so pervasive, largely invisible, and culturally uncharted. Many mid-career men and women may crave a fresh start but don't tell their bosses how they feel (see the exhibit "Sources of Frustration"). Employers view these people as solid corporate citizens, bank on their loyalty and commitment, and assume they're doing fine.

That neglect is bad for business: Many companies risk losing some of their best people, who may opt for early retirement or seek more exciting work elsewhere. Firms are too often blindsided when valuable people up and quit. We met, for instance, with executives at an aerospace company that had recently lost a midcareer technical manager who wanted to grow but couldn't see any near term possibilities for advancement. His bosses knew this but did nothing, so the employee left to start his own consulting firm. In retrospect, the executives recognized that they could have easily found ways to make his job more interesting and challenging. As it is, they're hoping he'll eventually return.

Also bad for business are the many disaffected people who stay. Every day that an employee is less than fully engaged in his or her work, the company pays a price—a loss of energy and enthusiasm, a lack of innovation and focus. We have become convinced that the problem of burned-out, turned-off employees who stay is even more threatening to corporate productivity than the problem of turnover.

In the years ahead, both tangible talent shortages and growing disengagement from work will present unprecedented challenges to business productivity and growth. In our March 2004 HBR article, "It's Time to Retire Retirement," we wrote of strategies to combat the coming brain drain, as the vanguard of baby boomers approaches retirement age. But the solution to talent shortages doesn't lie in entic-

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ing just one generation of older workers to continue contributing; rather, companies need to make working past retirement (at least part-time) the norm from now on. That means making current work more enjoyable and enriching, because the way to retain your middlescents for the long haul is to reengage them today.

The best way to do so is to tap into their hunger for renewal and help them launch into new, more productive, more meaningful roles and careers. Millions of midcareer men and women would like nothing better than to convert their restlessness into fresh energy. They just need the occasion, and perhaps a little assistance, to unleash and channel all that potential energy. Chances are, you're already using some of the career revitalization techniques we'll recommend, but we'll wager you're focusing them mainly on your company's stars. It's time to apply them to the much broader, and too often neglected, constituency of midcareer employees.

## Six Strategies for Revitalizing Careers

You may not be able to offer everybody more money or a prestigious title, but you can give just about anybody a fresh challenge or a new start. As many of our examples show, the most successful careers are the ones that stay in motion.

You must, however, take two preliminary steps to prepare the ground. First, you need to *remove the barriers* to occupational mobility. Such barriers take many forms. Policies (formal or tacit) regarding required time in role between job changes may be too strict. Your organization may have a job-posting system but still fill most openings through under-the-table recruiting that bypasses official channels. Your company may be tacitly unwilling, or even unconsciously disinclined, to invest in extensive training for employees over a certain age. Managers may get away with blocking employees from new assignments, and policies forbidding such behavior may be enforced loosely, at best. And employees themselves may perceive role changes, career redirections, new training, lateral moves, and flexible work arrangements as signs of inadequacy or failure.

Second, be sure to *find the keepers*. If you can identify high potentials through your performance management system, then surely you can also identify the next tier down. You want to go beyond the stars (who are probably getting special attention already) to find the other valuable contributors—the B players, people who will probably never make it to the executive suite but whose skills and experience you need to retain. These are the people you'd like to see eventually moving into flex retirement, not full retirement. Once you've identified them, pay special attention not only to their potential, performance, and progress but also to any warning signs of middlecent disillusionment and stagnation.

To help you keep those keepers, we've identified six fundamental tools.

**Fresh assignments.** A fresh assignment, often in a different geographical location or part of the organization, lets you take advantage of a person's existing skills, experience, and contacts while letting him or her develop new ones. The best assignments are often lateral moves that mix roughly equal parts old and new responsibilities.

During our interviews, for example, we met

## Sources of Frustration

### Career bottleneck

The baby boom generation is large, and too many people are competing for too few leadership positions in organizations that have been shedding layers of hierarchy. Next to job security, this is one of the biggest concerns of managers in their forties and fifties.

### Work/life tension

Midcareer workers are sandwiched between commitments to children and parents, often at the same time that their work responsibilities are peaking.

### Lengthening horizon

Those who are not accumulating sufficient wealth for retirement face the prospect of having to work many more years. Many of today's midcareer employees have been lavish spenders and sparse savers.

### Skills obsolescence

Some struggle to adjust to new ways of

working and managing in the information economy. Some hope that merely time or diligence will get them promoted into better and higher-paying jobs when what they most need is upgraded skills.

### Disillusionment with employer

This includes insecurity and distrust following waves of downsizing, as well as resentment over the enormous compensation gaps between topmost executives and almost all other employees.

### Burnout

People who have been career driven for 20 or more years are stretched and stressed, find their work unexciting or repetitive, and are running low on energy and the ability to cope.

### Career disappointment

The roles employees play and the impact of their work fail to measure up to their youthful ideals and ambitions.

with Jeff Kimpan, a longtime HR executive at General Motors. He worked in Mexico during the mid-1980s, a period of explosive growth there. Then he joined the executive ranks, most recently running HR for worldwide manufacturing operations. In the spring of 2005, the HR director for the company's fast-growing China operation quit, and Jeff volunteered for the job. It was actually a step down in corporate status and scope, and his colleagues were shocked that he'd accept what seemed a less than lateral move. He acknowledges that he had to check his ego, but he was ready for a change, and he knew that he could apply what he'd learned 20 years earlier in Mexico. His children were grown, and he was excited about getting away from restructurings and downsizings to work in a growing business.

It isn't an easy job. The China operation hopes to double its sales in two years and redouble in four, so the unit was already facing shortages of experienced technical and professional people when Jeff arrived. But he's having fun. "I can't wait to get to work each day," he says. "I come home just as tired as I did in Detroit—it's just a better kind of tired. This place is like a lab: Solutions aren't known, and they have to be invented every day. You'd have to be dead not to have fun in this job."

Principal Financial Group routinely chooses

empty nesters like Jeff for relocation, particularly those moves that would be difficult for employees with young and growing families. So does GE, which also taps experienced managers to integrate new acquisitions—an ideal way to offer an employee a change of scene and bring to bear a career's worth of organizational know-how. Diana Tyson, who has spent 22 years in organizational development with AT&T and now Lucent Technologies, recently left corporate headquarters for a yearlong engagement in the fast-growing Asia-Pacific region. "After this experience, it would be a lot harder for another company to recruit me," she told us.

Marriott International's information resources group takes another innovative approach to the fresh assignment. Tenures there are long and turnover is low, which means high levels of competence but little potential for upward mobility. So senior managers have been offered opportunities to take on a second, lateral role, while off-loading some of their current responsibilities, as a way to introduce new challenges. For example, Patton Conner, the vice president of guest services systems, recently took on a second "day job" as the regional VP for information resources of Marriott Canada. George Hall, a veteran human resources manager, is now also managing application development for the HR function. His new peers around the table are his customers in his other role, which he says gives him terrific insights into how to solve their problems. The more-junior employees who report to people like Patton and George have a chance to take on greater responsibility, since their bosses now have more to do in other areas.

Dow Chemical is one of the best examples we've seen of a company that has truly removed the barriers to career revitalization. Executives there assume that careers will always be in motion and that employees of all ages should always be preparing for their next career within the company. Dow backs up that expectation with tools that help people plan their next roles. One such is a career opportunity map that helps people determine which skills to acquire and which jobs to seek out. Another is a global job-posting system that alerts people to opportunities in other areas. It's a flat organization, so this approach allows the company to offer new and different work, even if it can't offer everyone a promotion.

Hewlett-Packard's Cathy Lyons has had a

## Avoiding Midcareer Crisis

To understand and encourage career rejuvenation for your organization's midcareer workers, answer these ten questions:

1. Who are your keepers? Besides those on the leadership track, who has the skills, experiences, attitude, and adaptability you need most for the long term?
2. How many of your midcareer employees need to rejuvenate some of their skills or careers?
3. Are you employing any methods to rejuvenate midcareer workers? Which work best?
4. How freely does experience, knowledge, and talent flow in your company? Can employees move around the organization? What's clogging the arteries?

5. How consistently do you make each job assignment work not only for overall business performance but also for individual employee growth?

6. Do you tap people for fresh assignments when their personal circumstances change (for example, when their children grow up and leave home)?

7. Do you encourage employees to change careers within your organization?

8. Do you offer sabbaticals?

9. How often do you hire midcareer people, including workforce reentrants?

10. Do you know which jobs are particularly suited to midcareer candidates? For which jobs do you avoid hiring or assigning them? What implicit biases are holding you back?

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half-dozen very different assignments within the company over the past 12 years, from running a manufacturing operation in Italy to managing the U.S. toner supplies business to her most recent assignment as chief marketing officer at corporate headquarters. She believes that three or four years is long enough to be in any one position. “When you’ve stopped learning, it’s time to move on or step aside,” she told us.

**Career changes.** Middlescents often dream of—and in some cases end up pursuing—something fundamentally new. Yet jumping the corporate ship is risky, so an employer that can offer an attractive internal career change has a chance to retain valuable talent. An employee may develop a new specialty, assume an altogether different job, or sometimes return from a management track to an individual contributor role.

Before joining Prudential Financial’s Prudential Relocation business, Jim Russo spent 13 years with a major competitor in a customer relations role that kept him on the road. Looking for less travel and more time with his young family, Jim joined Prudential Relocation’s new Phoenix office in 2000 as director of service delivery, managing a team of 21. The move was good for work/life balance, but after a while Jim became disenchanted: “The job wasn’t my strength or my passion. I didn’t feel as motivated, I missed working directly with customers, and I felt I was just getting the job done.” By all measures, he was doing a good job, but he knew the situation wasn’t right.

Jim liked the company and networked with a variety of managers to learn what kinds of opportunities there might be. He landed a position in field sales, a role for which he had no direct experience but which seemed to play to his strengths. The results—for Jim and the company—were beyond excellent. As sales director for the West Coast, he went up against his former employer. “I’m competitive by nature, and the job really fit,” he says. “It gave me new life, more passion, more confidence, and companywide recognition—I know I’m a more important part of the company, and that really matters.” In his first year, Jim was one of the top two salespeople; in his second, he tripled his sales target. His advice to others: “You’ve got to have passion for the job to add value every day. If you find yourself just going through the motions, do something

different—perhaps very different. We all have strengths; find yours and play to them.”

Such career shifts should be a natural part of corporate life. Dave Nassef has had three distinct careers in his 30-plus years with Pitney Bowes. He started as a personnel manager in a factory and made a lateral move to marketing. When the company centralized HR, he was one of the few people with both manufacturing and marketing experience, and at 40 he was given HR responsibility for half the company. He’s since changed careers within the firm twice—first to take on the newly created job of corporate ombudsman and problem solver and then to move into the policy sphere, representing Pitney Bowes in Washington in legislative matters relating to the mailing industry. Each time, Dave surprised everyone around him with his willingness—eagerness, even—to make a lateral move. Dave’s philosophy: “You have to ask yourself whether you want to thrive in a company or merely survive. If you want to thrive, then be prepared to take the risk of making a career change.”

**Mentoring colleagues.** Putting experienced employees into mentoring, teaching, and other knowledge-sharing roles has the dual benefit of reengaging the midcareer worker and boosting the expertise and organizational know-how of less-experienced employees. For middlescents, serving as a mentor is a personally fulfilling way to share a lifetime of experience, give back to the organization, and make a fresh set of social connections in the workplace. Mentor relationships are often stereotyped as one-way transfers from old to young for the purposes of youthful personal development and career advancement. In fact, they should be viewed as a two-way pairing of knowledge to gain with knowledge to share.

That’s how mentoring works at Intel, where the partner may outrank the mentor. The program began in a chip-making factory in New Mexico in 1997, when Intel was growing, and many of the factory’s managers and technical experts were being transferred to new locations. New experts needed to be developed in a variety of fields. So the factory’s top managers started matching partners with mentors who had the needed skills and knowledge. Today, a companywide employee database, which tracks skills attained and desired, helps match partners with mentors, who (thanks to the Internet) may be in another country. Both mentor and

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partner take a class to learn some guidelines—what to talk about, how to maximize the mutual benefit of their relationship—and then they set the details of that relationship in a contract that specifies goals and deadlines.

Mentoring is the best way to put the greatest number of midcareer workers into knowledge-sharing roles. But there are other ways. It's common practice for experienced and expert employees to develop and deliver training programs. They can also teach and guide colleagues through internal-consulting roles, participate in business performance reviews, and lead business improvement projects. Many midcareer workers are happy to take charge of change initiatives, which are especially appealing as a way to assist colleagues, improve results, and serve the higher mission of the enterprise.

**Fresh training.** Corporate training today is disproportionately aimed at the young (especially new employees who need to learn the basics) and at the high potentials. The tacit assumptions are that midcareer people have been trained already, and what little additional training they might need they get on the job. These assumptions are, at best, only partly true.

Many of today's midcareer workers are well educated and have retained their love of learning. They know that increasing their skills will raise their chances for personal and professional advancement. However, many find themselves too busy for extensive education and training; personal development time comes at the sacrifice of other responsibilities, both on the job and off. And some people, especially those who have reached positions of authority, stop seeking development opportunities because they hesitate to take risks or don't want to admit that they have things to learn.

Meanwhile, too many organizations foster a silent conspiracy against education: They cut the training and development budget first in lean times. They stand silent when managers discourage employees from seeking training on the grounds that it will interfere with getting the work done. And they fail to require managers to set career development plans for all their employees. As a result, many midcareer workers are overdue for a serious infusion of training—which can include refresher courses, in-depth education to develop new skills, and brief introductions to new ideas or areas of business that expand their perspectives and trigger their interest in learning more.

Fresh training is, of course, often integral to career changes as well as to employee retention. Lincoln Electric's Leopard Program, for instance, was designed explicitly to enable employees to "change their spots." When patterns of demand for steel fabrication products changed, the company trained dozens of factory and clerical staff volunteers to become assistant salespeople. In some Japanese manufacturers, assembly-line workers regularly train to become product service technicians. After years on the line, such employees literally know the products inside and out, and probably want a change of work. And the U.K.'s National Health Service is responding to chronic nursing shortages by training aides to become nurses—a shift to a very different career path.

**Sabbaticals.** One of the best ways to rejuvenate, personally and professionally, is simply to get away from the routine of the job for a significant amount of time. A common feature of academic employment relationships, sabbaticals remain rare and underused in the business world. In 2001, Hewitt Associates surveyed more than 500 organizations in the United States and found that just 5% offered sabbaticals, either paid or unpaid. Yet a survey the same year by Principal Financial Group found that more than 50% of employees say they long for a sabbatical but feel they can't take one because of financial concerns or employer discouragement. Employers' reluctance centers on cost and, for key employees, potential disruption to business operations. Employees' reluctance comes from fear that taking a leave will somehow mark them as less committed than those who don't interrupt their work. One manager in the media industry said that her company had made an apparently generous offer of an eight-week paid sabbatical every few years. But, she added, she knew of not a single person who had taken advantage of the benefit. It was universally assumed that when you returned, you'd find your desk out in the hall. You might not be fired, exactly, but the general opinion was that you'd be displaced. This perception is unfortunate because people tend to return from sabbaticals more committed than ever. They've had a chance to recharge, to do something different, and they're appreciative of their companies for giving them the opportunity.

There are organizations that get it—that know that the cost of replacing a middlescent worker in need of a break may far outweigh the

cost of the paid time off. Intel employees are eligible for an eight-week sabbatical, with full pay, after every seven years of full-time service. Silicon Graphics' regular full-time employees in the United States and Canada can take six weeks paid time off after four years. Adobe Systems offers three paid weeks off after every five years of service. Arrow Electronics offers up to ten weeks after seven years.

Hallmark Cards uses sabbaticals not only to get people out of the routine of work but also to place them into enlightening settings with the goal of recharging their artistic talent. They might spend time at the company's innovation center; go on "creative research travel" to museums, conferences, inspiring locales, or places where they can study customers and social trends; or simply spend time at the company's 172-acre farm. Most Hallmark sabbaticals are brief, but senior creative staff can also be honored with a sabbatical award of six months away from work to pursue an area of artistic exploration.

Wells Fargo's Volunteer Leave program, more than 20 years in operation, offers employees with at least five years' service and a qualifying performance rating the opportunity to work in a community service setting of their choosing for up to four months in a calendar year while receiving full pay and benefits. The work they do is often inspiring: People have used the time to volunteer at a camp for cancer victims; to represent Mothers Against Drunk Driving, traveling across the country to speak with high school students; and to work in Armenia to help women develop small businesses. This last was so successful that the project was adopted by the United Nations, and the participant was allowed to extend her leave to assist the UN in setting it up. For its part, the company reaps benefits on several fronts, including good publicity both within the corporation and out in the communities where participants are serving. The most important benefit, of course, is a returning employee who is highly energized and recommitted to the organization.

**Expanding leadership development.** Many of the executives we spoke with in our research cited shortages in their leadership succession pipelines. On the face of it, this is surprising because, in terms of raw numbers, there are plenty of midcareer workers eager to move up the ladder and fill senior manage-

ment slots. But corporate restructuring and flattening organizations have eroded the old career paths, and people can't accumulate the needed set of leadership skills on the job. The situation is sadly ironic—midcareer managers are frustrated by the lack of promotion opportunities, and corporate executives are concerned with a lack of candidates with the right experience. The solution is to widen access to leadership development programs to both rejuvenate midcareer managers and refill the leadership pipeline.

Participation in leadership development programs is a form of recognition of an employee's value and potential, and workers graduate from them with a renewed commitment to the organization's goals. But in many companies, it's difficult for people not already recognized as high potentials to get in line for these opportunities. We strongly recommend admitting late bloomers, making it easier for midcareer employees to take advantage of these programs.

Independence Blue Cross has put one-third of its top 600 people, most of them midcareer employees, through a leadership program focused on individual development and learning by doing. It includes a weeklong session at the Wharton School, individual coaching and career development planning, and work on an important business project. The insurer is now thinking about creating a graduate course for people who have already been through the program. The company is also trying to maintain career momentum after the program through a broader-based approach to succession planning and by finding its graduates new assignments that enable them to move around the business more.

The fast track should have both off- and on-ramps. A communications company shared the story of one individual who dropped off and then rejoined his company's fast track. A 12-year veteran, he had come up through finance, been deemed a high potential, and then plateaued and started to look elsewhere. Top managers at first figured, "Oh well, he wasn't CFO material anyway." But later they took a look at people who had dropped out of the high-potential program to find out why. This employee had stalled in his career because he hadn't found work that really excited him. After further assessment, he became procurement director for a product line, where his in-

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nate skills and enthusiasm as a negotiator, financial analyst, and savvy gambler paid off. In his first year, he saved the company \$20 million doing work he loves.

### **Rekindle Now**

We're not talking about rescuing a few stragglers at the corporation's fringe; we're talking about tens of millions of capable midcareer employees who are frustrated in their desire to do something new and exciting, who are stymied in their wish to contribute to the organization's success in different ways. What's stopping companies from tapping into all that potential? Perhaps it's the assumption that careers belong to employees—that people are ultimately responsible for developing their own skills, for marketing themselves, and for charting their own paths. This is true; the responsibility for career moves belongs primarily to the individual, and most employees would agree. But the fact is, organizations create the conditions under which career initiatives flourish or fade. It's in the enlightened self-interest of the organization to remove the institutional barriers to individual fulfillment and ambition, to pay the attention and devote the resources needed to keep new possibilities open and revitalize careers. This isn't paternalism—or a return to employment practices of yesterday. It's good management.

Over the next ten years, workforce demo-

graphics will turn against employers. If your organization wants to control its fate (and costs) when the boomer retirement wave and associated brain drain hit with full force, start today to systematically retain—and recruit—people with the skills and capabilities you will want to keep on hand for the long run. Recognize that many of your midcareer employees are in middlecence: For personal and professional reasons, they're getting restless. Don't just assume they'll stay, and then hope for the best. Reengage them by energizing their careers now.

The techniques we've recommended are not exclusively for midcareer workers, of course, but they will have the greatest impact on this cohort. They should prove neither expensive nor difficult to practice, and the payback—renewed commitment and productivity on the one hand, reduced replacement cost on the other—hits right away. The actions we recommend are largely a matter of paying closer attention to the often silent majority—the midcareer employees who form the heart and backbone of your workforce.

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## Further Reading

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### [It's Time to Retire Retirement](#)

Ken Dychtwald, Tamara Erickson, and Bob Morison

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### [Job Sculpting: The Art of Retaining Your Best People](#)

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