

## **Mid Life Career Crisis in Employees: Critical Analysis and role of HR Department in the Organisation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Mid life career crisis is a phenomenon, where many employees find it difficult to adjust their life according to present situation. They want to change the working processes to satisfy their needs. Sometimes they are successful in finding and adopting new processes and become shining example in front of others and many others fail. HR department of an organization can play important role in identifying such employees in early stage of crisis and help them to weather the same with the help of counselling and adopting different other processes & tools. If the employee is willing to change his overall line of work, has sufficient qualifications and experience to do alternate jobs and if the organization has such vacancies, HR can encourage employees to take new challenges. Many times employees are unsure about their future in the organisation and it results in mid career crisis. If there is feeling of uncertainty and insecurity among the employees, HR department can help to fix the problem. This paper sites different symptoms of the crisis affected employees and remedial measures which can help such employees to come out of the situation at the earliest. It is important that employee is willing to share his problems and at the same time HR is ready to listen to the same. If both work in sync, it becomes win-win situation for employee and organisation. Further research in the area can help to formalize standard procedure to identify and fix mid life career crisis in organisations.*

**Keywords:** Mid life, career, crisis, frustration, human resource, counselling, entrepreneurship.

### **INTRODUCTION:**

#### **Mid life career crisis:**

Mid life career crisis is a particular period in individual's life in which he / she starts to realise, understand and face his / her mortality. Person starts asking questions like what am I doing and why I am doing these things? Depending on person to person, this phenomenon can occur between the age of late 30's to 65 years. It can happen due to various reasons. One of the most important reasons can be feeling of choosing incorrect career in life, disliking current work, strong under feeling that life is too small and one should try something different which the person likes. If these individuals do not find suitable work to carry on, it results in mid life crisis in their lives.

#### **Purpose of the Study:**

Many times we see mid aged people around us who are well educated, doing jobs in good organizations, financially successful, but have lost purpose of their lives. They just work in order to finish their existing liabilities like home loan, car loan. This situation is especially prevalent in IT industry in India. Occasionally, we see and hear that some of these persons have left the jobs and trying something, which they like. Some of them become very successful entrepreneurs, but many struggle to reach their goal. Leaving an existing job is

generally an extreme case which can be avoided. Openness to HR about an urge to do something different and willingness of HR department to address the same can help in avoiding crisis situations for employees. There are limited success stories on this front too. The study attempts to address the questions: 1) why employees really feel mid career crisis 2) is there efficient way to address the issues internally within the organisation through HR department.

### LITERATURE REVIEW:

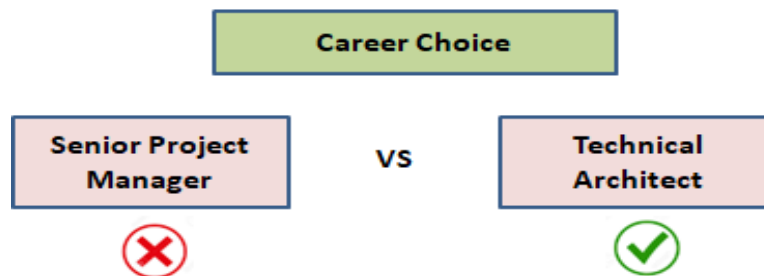
Bill Burnett and Dave Evans (2016), in their book tell us that 80% people do not know about their passions and how they can peruse the same in their existing or new careers. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014) in his novel discuss about self identity, age related career issues. Richard N. Bolles (1975) discuss about various techniques and skills that employee can learn to adapt to new career moves within or new organizations. Basu, P. (2015) in his book has discussed in detail mid life crisis and how some people successfully face the same and others won't. Paul D. Tieger, Barbara Barron, and Kelly Tieger through their book suggest finding different careers according to personality. They also suggest experimenting to find out an environment where our personality type will be most "productive and fulfilled." David Whyte (2001) talks about mid life crisis as crossing the unknown sea and tells us about how to weather the storm. Various short articles and reports discuss in depth about the crisis and how companies can help employees in difficult times.

### METHODOLOGY:

We have tried to analyse the situation by practical case studies.

#### Case Study I:

**Figure 1: Confusion regarding appropriate career choice.**



Vinit, Senior Project Manager in one of the reputed IT companies started getting bored about his day to day role. He was excellent programmer and he wished to continue coding. Due to his excellent programming skills along with social skills he climbed the ladder of success very fast and was considered as one of the youngest project managers in the company. Everybody looked after him as icon of success and role model. As Vinit was promoted to senior project manager post, his main work was to handle the team of 50 programmers, and get the allocated project work done in stipulated time. Vinit disliked people management work, but he was earning handsome salary and hence kept quiet. Being a service oriented organization, there was always pressure from the client to get the work done as early as possible and Vinit's focus was to meet the deadline.

Vinit hardly used to code now. He used to find lot of corrections during code reviews, but he had to ask his team mates to correct the same. He had communicated his problems to the management earlier, but management said that if he wants to succeed in his career, he should accept a higher responsibility of people management rather than become individual contributor. With higher expectations from client and handling 50 people with their different expectations, Vinit got frustrated.

He had now lost touch with coding and was expert in Excel management. Although he was struggling on both ends, Vinit was trying to carry forward the work. Soon client became dissatisfied, as expected output was not delivered on time.

Management approached Vinit with the issues from client. Management told him upfront, that with the kind of salary he is getting, he can't become individual contributor. Vinit had lost a touch with programming, so he was not confident enough, if he can become technical architect, which was an important individual contributor position. One day, Vinit became so much frustrated, that he resigned. HR and management then tried to discuss the situation with him and even offered him individual contributor role for short time, but it was too late.

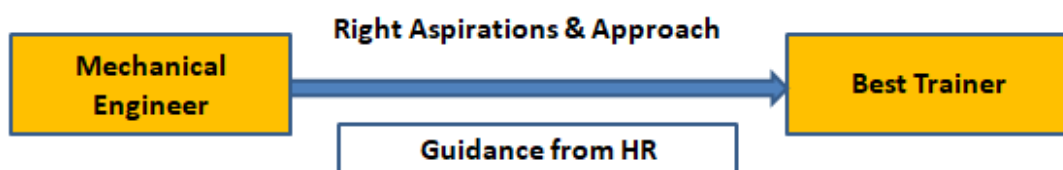
This can be considered as one of the examples of mid level crisis. If Vinit and HR would have identified what he likes, perhaps Vinit would have upgraded his skill sets at right time to become technical architect. He could have made little less money in overall process, but he would have been happy.

**Case Study II:**

**I am not born for this job: (Eureka moment of life)**

Many times people like certain things, but cannot make them as career due to different reasons. In developing countries, generally there is pressure from parents on children to become successful in their individual corporate careers and jobs. Most of the children study and work under the burden of these expectations. These people always have their likings suppressed over the period of time. When they settle down in life, they start dreaming about those alternative jobs /wishes. Life becomes difficult for them as they cannot concentrate on existing jobs and they cannot have their dream job. If the employee is working in good organisation, HR can play very important role here to understand the wishes of employee and if possible provide limited opportunities within the organisation to fulfil his wishes.

**Figure 2: Selection of appropriate career choice**



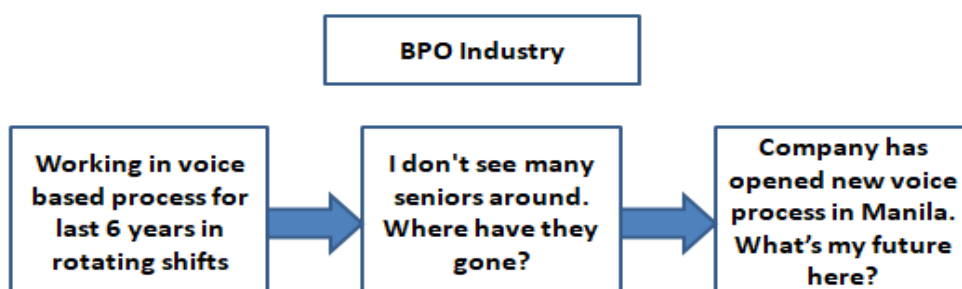
Suresh started his work as mechanical engineer in a company. Although he was good in his day to day work, he didn't seem to be happy with what he was doing. He was outspoken and had good teaching skills. He used to explain the concepts to his colleagues very well. After few years, one day head HR found that Suresh was waiting outside his cabin. HR greeted him and Suresh told him that he does not want to do assembly line work anymore. He has good communication skills and teaching knack. He wants to explore a career which will help him utilize his skills and give him mental satisfaction. Head HR asked Suresh to join MBA course. HR encouraged Suresh that if he gets good score, company will refund his course fees and then he can think about alternate career in the company itself rather than outside. Suresh wanted to do something as a part of his mid life career crisis, but it would have been hazardous for him to leave the job. After completion of MBA, HR started involving Suresh in management meetings. Suresh also started taking technical and general trainings within the company. After few years, Suresh became in-house trainer in the company for any management or technical trainings. Company saved lakhs of rupees in engaging corporate trainers. Here HR thought about the needs of the employee and engaged him at the right time. This benefited company and Suresh in the longer run.

**Case Study III:**

**Mid life career crisis due to lack of clarity regarding future career path:**

Many times we find that people work on jobs that involve repetitive processes. Although one needs to be skilful enough to handle these processes, employees usually adopt to the situation very well. After certain time period, they start feeling bored about existing job. At the same time they become worried about their future, because they are working on jobs which are based on repetitive process. Workers especially working in industries like BPO show these tendencies. There is lack of clarity about future of the job. In such scenarios, employees start worrying and sometimes victim of Mid Life career crisis.

**Figure 3: Insecurity among employees**



Nitesh was working on a voice based process in one of the leading BPOs in India. He started his career with the company six years back. Normally due to rotating shifts and few other reasons, there was lot of attrition in the company. Nitesh was always loyal to the company and worked for 6 years. Now he was team leader, but do not see many peers around. Many of his colleagues, who joined with him or later, left the company long back. Some of them chose different careers successfully and others are struggling to settle down. Nitesh didn't know what's going to happen to him in next 2-3 years. Company had opened a new voice based process in Manila and it's cheaper to do business from there. Nitesh was now getting increasingly frustrated about his future role and future in the company. It started affecting his health, and people used to notice his abnormal behaviour at times. It's time that Nitesh meets HR and talk to them about a) His future in the organization b) Company's future plans in India c) Working in regular shifts.

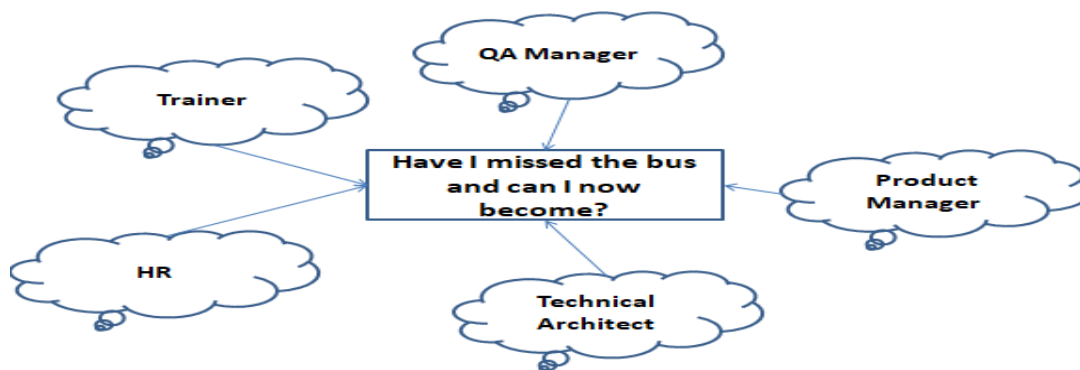
If the company is transparent with fair HR policies, he should get answers of all his questions without any problems. If some policies are not clear e.g. future plans of company regarding Indian operations, HR should be able to tell Nitesh about the same. At the same time they should try to convince him about his good future in the company. If he has any health issues due to rotating shifts, they should be addressed and if possible, he should be allowed to work in regular shift.

HR department came to know about the concerns of one of the senior most employees. They thought it's high time to engage everyone in one to one / group based discussions to clarify doubts in the minds of employees. They also started long career award in the company (minimum 5 years) and Nitesh was one of the few to get them. Now Nitesh is rest assured that he has good future in the company and slowly getting back to his previous efficiency in work.

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION:

### Who am I Crisis?

**Figure 4: Feeling of missing something in earlier life**



Many times, employees after competing few years in the organization under specific roles, find out that they are not made for this role. Sometimes they start wondering why in the first place they chose this role. Normally these things begin to happen during mid life. Till this time, most of the employees are expert in their existing roles, but do not want to continue with the same, due to too many expectations, repetitive nature of jobs, peer pressures etc. People have earned enough money and generally they are settled in life. Here they start thinking about alternate roles which they may like to do. Sometimes employees like to do other jobs, but they may not be high paying, so they are not able to take decision between their liking vs existing income.

Some employees, who are confident about themselves, approach HR departments with their willingness to shift careers. Some others, who are not bold enough to express themselves, continue their existing jobs, and by the time they realise that they cannot really continue with the job, it's already too late. Their performance in existing job starts deteriorating and they can't really go elsewhere. Normally these employees face the axe of the employers and life becomes too difficult for them. They really do not want to do the job they were doing earlier in any other organization, and other organizations are not ready to employ these people in different roles without any experience.

### Right guidance at right time:

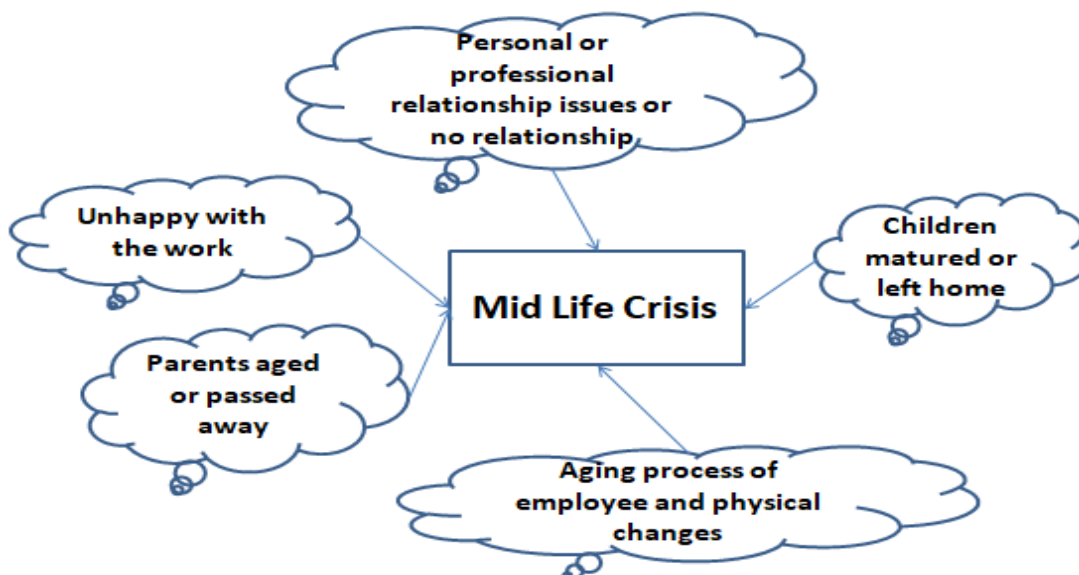
Whenever any organization hires any employee, it invests in the same. Organizations spend money on identifying resources with specific skill sets, who can do particular tasks and then train them. It is expected that

all this investment in an employee will be profitable, subject to long career of the employee with the organization. Many times we observe that these senior employees had certain skill sets earlier, but these people are now doing people management and have lost their original skill sets.

When some employees start feeling mid life crisis, their performance start deteriorating and this is the phase where they require some professional help or guidance. Sometimes it is easier to handle the expectations of people and sometimes they are totally different. HR can play critical role where expectations can be handled in organizational level. Sometimes these are only fascinations and at certain juncture, employees suddenly feel that they can do these dreamed roles. Here HR can clearly tell them that it's impossible to do such a transition and employee should face the reality.

### Triggers of mid life crisis situations among employees:

Figure 5: Probable reasons of mid career crisis

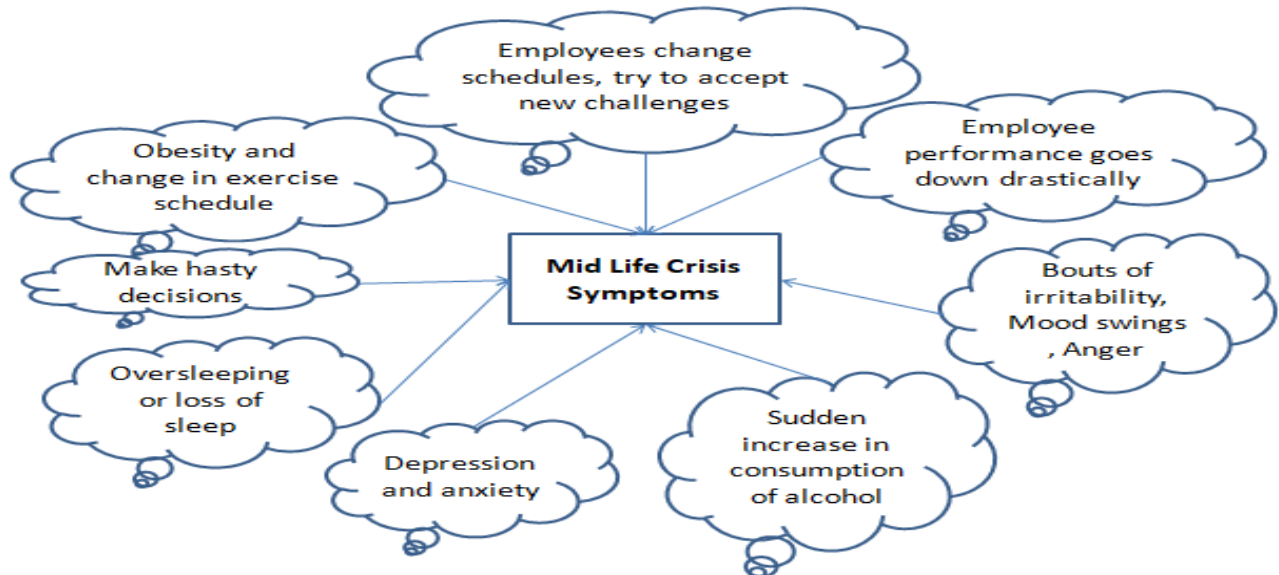


Employees in the organisation can face mid life crisis due to following reasons

- **Relationship issues:** These issues may be personal or professional issues. In case of professional issues, HR can help to certain extent. There are situations where people get frustrated because they are alone. They are normally introvert and hardly have any friends. Such cases should be forwarded to counsellor, who can address such issues.
- **Children staying away:** Many people are used to company of their children and attached to them mentally and emotionally. If children move away from home for higher studies, it creates a huge vacuum in person's life and may trigger mid life crisis. Such cases should be referred to counsellor.
- **Physical changes in employees:** People tend to become old with age and their physical appearance starts changing. Their hair become gray, they become slightly overweight and start to get a feeling that they have already spent half of their life. Very few years of active life are now left with them and they should try to finish all their incomplete wishes. This is the biggest trigger in mid life crisis. Counsellors can help in calming the situations.
- **Parents aged or passed away:** This is an individual issue and can best be handled by counsellor.
- **Unhappy with the work:** This is the area where HR can engage employee to understand his aspirations. If his aspirations are close to some of the requirements within the organisation, he can direct the employee on right path in achieving those goals. If employee wants to do something totally different, HR should explain the employee about the practical difficulties in carrying out those things and inform him clearly that these opportunities may not be available within the organisation. Employee can then be very clear in his mind and take his / her own decisions. Engaging employee at right time is most important. If HR approaches employee when it's too late, employee has mostly lost his / her moral and at this moment, remedial measures, although possible within the organisation, may not work.

## How to identify employees facing mid life crisis:

Figure 6: Symptoms of mid career crisis



### Employees in the organization can show following symptoms as a part of mid life crisis:

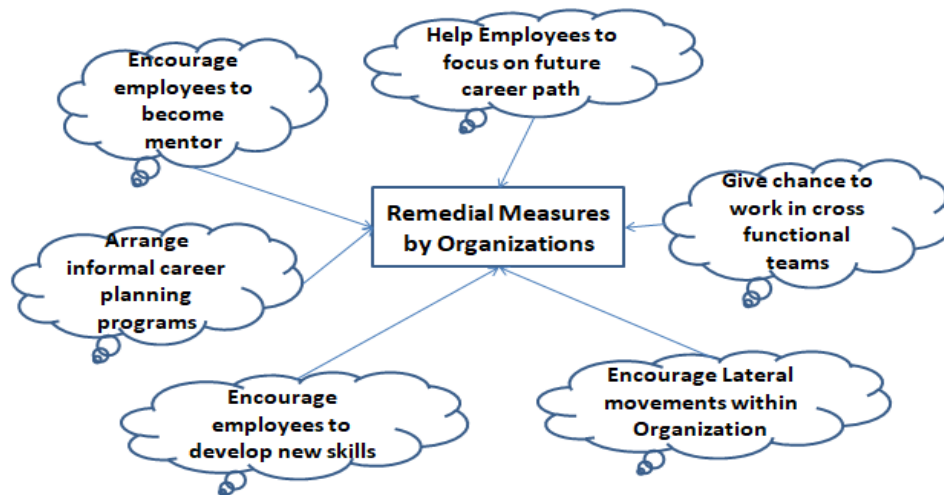
- **Change in Schedule:** Employees suddenly change their working schedule. E.g. If they are coming during morning shift earlier, they suddenly start working in afternoon shift if the organization work schedule is flexible. Additionally they also try to accept new challenges which may or may not be handled by them.
- **Performance issues:** Employees, who used to perform very well, suddenly face issues in delivering their output. This is a very good indicator to understand that something is going wrong with the employee and perhaps a timely discussion at this stage would help everyone.
- **Irritability, Anger:** Employee gets irritated suddenly on small changes / disturbances, which he / she may ignore in normal circumstances. There are sudden mood swings and employee can become short tempered.
- **Sudden increase in consumption of alcohol:** Employee, who used to drink occasionally, suddenly starts drinking more. This behaviour can be easily noticed by close friends or family members.
- **Depression & Anxiety:** Employee is generally in depressed state of mind. He shows several disorders which may cause nervousness, fear, and apprehension.
- **Irrational decisions:** Employee may take irrational and hasty decisions. They take such decisions with a fear that very small period of their life is remaining and if they do not act fast, they may lose some opportunities.
- **Obesity / Change in exercise schedule:** employees become obese as they do not exercise at all or sometimes there is noticeable change in their exercise schedule. E.g. a person visiting a gym in the morning suddenly starts coming in the evening.

### How employees cope up with Mid Career Crisis:

It's not easy to go through such situation for many employees. Those who face positive side of crisis may suddenly find the purpose of their life and become star performers in their next roles, however many end up with a depressed life. They cannot make decisions in life and many times lose good jobs. In such cases, support from family members, close friends and relatives may help them recover from the situation. It's important that the old generation people from the family help them and explain them how they adapted to different situations in life. Many times employees face this situation during economic downturn. It becomes very difficult for many employees to get adjusted to slowing business cycles and face new realities in life. During downturn, these senior people are often targeted due to their higher experience and higher salaries. In such cases it is important that these employees focus on next phase of their growth to come out of crisis.

Probable measures by HR departments to help mid career Crisis employees:

Figure 7: Remedial measures to fix the mid career crisis



Following are some of the measures that companies can adopt to help the employees going through mid career crisis:

- **Help employees to focus on future career path:** In certain cases, where employees are uncomfortable, as they are not sure about their future role in the company, HR can take proactive approach to help these employees understand their importance in the organization and future roles they can get subject to performance. This will help in boosting the spirit and moral of the employees going through the crisis.
- **Give change to work in cross functional teams:** Sometimes employees are bored to do existing work and in search of working on something new and challenging processes. If such employees are given a change to work on any existing cross functional process, it will help employees to get back to their normal lives.
- **Lateral movements within the organization:** As the organization grows in size, different teams with different skill sets start working in the organization. Organization should create a policy of creating backup resources for existing processes and then encourage lateral movements. This will help those employees who want to change existing process work and can adapt to new processes quickly.
- **Develop new skills:** Employees should be encouraged to develop new skills such as networking, blogging, public speaking etc. This will help them to adapt to newer roles in future.
- **Arrange informal career planning programs:** This will help those employees who are unsure about future career paths. Many times in IT organizations, people are confused about career planning. They are not sure if they want to become Technical expert, People Manager or Subject matter expert. HR should engage such employees to understand their core interest and guide them regarding their future career path according to their interests.
- **Mentorship:** Use those employees as mentors, who earlier faced mid crisis career issue to guide existing employees who are facing these problems. Seniors have exact understanding of pain and can guide the employees to come out of the situation faster.

**Indian Scenario:**

In India lot of MNC companies have specialised HR resources in HR department for counselling. Many companies arrange sessions on stress management to make sure that the employees get right guidance to solve their queries related to stress management. However a lot needs to be done especially in terms of Mid Career crisis management. In India, resources with similar skill sets are available in plenty. Even if one resource leaves the company, HR Teams easily get required substitute. Therefore people hardly bother to care about those who are facing the crisis situation. Additionally interdisciplinary work or cross team work is a concept which is still in nascent stage. In western countries, many times, due to lack of new resources with specific skill sets, existing employees are encouraged to take new roles. In India due to abundant work force with variable skill sets, this encouragement is given to limited extent. This situation may not change in near forcible future. Those who become unemployed while going through this problem typically face 40's syndrome, where it becomes difficult to get a new job. Life becomes very tough for such people. They are not treated well in families and friend circles, which again makes situation worse. Very few of them come out successfully from this crisis with alternate careers or entrepreneurship.

## CONCLUSION:

Mid life career crisis is a phenomenon which is faced by many individuals. This may happen due uncertainty about future career path, working on non challenging processes for several years, working on something which people hate to do. People are generally adoptive to the situations to certain extent, but when the situation goes out of hand, it starts showing in their behavioural patterns. These people think that they haven't done much in their life till date and very small life is remaining ahead of them. They start taking hasty decisions and accepting new challenges which may or may not be handled by them.

It is important to identify such people in early stage and appropriate counselling should be done to understand their state of mind. If possible, and available, they should be allowed to work on new challenging processes. This becomes a win-win situation for employee and organization. HR team should play an important role here. Further study in this area can help to formalize standard process to identify employees facing mid life crisis and help them to come out of the situation at the earliest.

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