Mid-career employees make up more than half the workforce. One in four has managerial or supervisory responsibility. What can we do to retain these valuable employees and ensure no loss in productivity?

THE PROBLEMS
Middlescence seems to be hitting today’s mid-career workers, members of Generation X, harder than their predecessors. Increased longevity, delayed (and multiple) marriages and large numbers of two-career households have altered family patterns such that middlescents are often sandwiched at home between raising children and caring for aging parents precisely at the time when their job responsibilities are peaking.

Xers came of age in the 80s and 90s – times of economic uncertainty and domestic social change. Latin American economies were experiencing persistent financial crises and the economy in the U.S. and much of Europe was in the doldrums.

On the home front, many Xers lived through a significant shift in the social fabric. Divorce rates skyrocketed. Many mothers entered the workforce, and the Xers became the first generation to be labeled “latch key kids.”

Their teen years marked a significant change in the psychological contracts between employers and employees, as large scale lay-offs became a common corporate practice. The sense of unease and mistrust around corporate commitments is an almost universally shared view among Generation X and, as a result, they tend to be very wary of putting all their eggs in one corporate basket or even one area of career specialty.

This generation will benefit from increased longevity; the average 50-year old today could be looking forward to 30 years or more of healthy, active liv-
While this can be a blessing, those without the financial resources to chart their own course face the prospect of having to work indefinitely at a job they don’t really enjoy.

Today, their sources of frustration often include:

- **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 40s and 50s.

- **Work/life tension.** Mid-career 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.

- **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-paying jobs when what they most need is upgraded skills.

- **Disillusionment with employer.** This includes insecurity and mistrust following waves of downsizing, as well as resentment over the enormous compensation gaps between topmost executives and 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.

Organizations stand to lose in several ways. Neglect their discontent, and you risk losing valued performers who seek exciting work elsewhere. This is a dangerous development considering the brain drain that will soon hit when the vanguard of baby boomers retires. In the years ahead, both tangible talent shortages and growing disengagement from work will present unprecedented challenges to business productivity and growth.

Also bad for business are the many disaffected people who stay. Disaffected middlescents who stay because they need the money take an even worse toll – their lack of energy, innovation and focus erodes your firm’s productivity. Every day that an employee is less than fully engaged in his or her work, the company pays a price: loss of energy and enthusiasm.
and 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.

How to avoid these losses? 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 mid-career 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.

**SIX STRATEGIES TO REVITALIZE**

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. The most successful careers are the ones that stay in motion.

**Fresh Assignments** – A fresh assignment, often in a different geographical location or part of the organization, takes 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 of old and new responsibilities.

This approach is particularly valuable for members of Generation X. They don’t like to be pigeon-holed or pushed out on a limb of specialization with the inherent danger of a whimsical corporation sawing that limb off behind them during the next restructuring. It allows them to keep their options open and their skills diverse to be as self-reliant as possible.

**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. Make such career shifts a natural part of corporate life.

**Mentoring Colleagues** – Putting experienced employees into mentoring, teaching and other knowledge-sharing roles has the dual benefit of re-engaging the mid-career 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.

Other effective approaches are to ask 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.

**Fresh Training** – Most of today’s mid-career workers have a strong desire to learn. Gen-Xers know that increasing their skills will raise their chances for advancement.

Unfortunately, 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 mid-career people have been trained already and what little additional training they might need can be learned on the job.

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 mid-career 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.

**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 academia, sabbaticals remain rare and underused in the business world.

Employers’ reluctance centres on cost and, for key employees, potential disruption to business operations. Their reluctance comes from fear that taking a leave will somehow mark them as less committed than those who don’t interrupt their work.

In fact, research shows that 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 know that the cost of replacing a middlescent worker in need of a break may far outweigh the cost of the paid time off.

**Expanding Leadership Development** – Corporate restructuring and flattening organizations have eroded the old career paths, creating concern that people aren’t accumulating the needed set of leadership skills on the job. The situation is sadly ironic. Mid-career 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.

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 mid-career 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.

While the responsibility for career moves belongs primarily to the individual, organizations can 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 attention and devote the resources needed to keep new possibilities open and revitalize careers.

Recognize that many of your mid-career employees are in middlescence; they’re getting restless. Re-engage them by energizing their careers now.