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CultureWork

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No Longer Emerging and Not Ready to Retire: A Look at Mid-Career Arts Managers (1)

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(Note: Links open in a separate browser window or tab)

In June 2007, Americans for the Arts (AFTA) (<http://www.artsusa.org>) asked me to convene two exploratory peer groups at their annual conference in Las Vegas for those conferees who identified themselves as being at “mid-career” in arts management. AFTA had already had success in previous years developing a peer group for young arts professionals called the Emerging Leaders Network (http://www.artsusa.org/services/emerging_leaders/default.asp) which has provided important networking and support for those entering the arts management career field. This was an opportunity for AFTA to hear from another sector of the arts management field.

Without providing chronological signifiers, AFTA allowed people to self-identify with the term mid-career. Not knowing what to expect, AFTA’s staff and I were pleased when over 30 people showed up on each Saturday and Sunday morning at 8:30 a.m. for an hour’s discussion about what being at mid-career meant to them. They described feeling under-stimulated, stretched between work and home life, lacking advancement opportunities within their organization, and needing more challenge. They also talked of their commitment to the field and their desire to find solutions to these concerns. It was apparent that the peer group participants were expressing something that was likely not isolated to the total 50+ people who attended these sessions, but probably reflective of a larger trend in the field.

Defining Mid-Career

One cannot define mid-careerists using the terms that are used for other categories of workers such as *Baby Boomers* (born between 1945 and 1964), *Generation X* (born roughly between 1961 and 1981), and *Generation Y* (born after 1977) and who were the subjects of previous articles I wrote for *CultureWork* (2). This is because mid-career is not a generational designation as detailed in my previous articles, so much as it is a career stage that identifies those who are defined more by years in the field rather than by generationally significant patterns and characteristics. As someone in the peer group stated, “mid-career is a state of mind”.

The issues mid-careerists face, for the most part, are connected with a life stage. As life expectancy lengthens, the time spent at mid-career grows with it. The average nonprofit arts administrator who starts their career at 23 and stays until they are 65-70 spends more than 30 years in the middle. Experiencing neither the momentum of a new career, nor the legacy creation of the years prior to retirement, 30 years is a significant amount of time to spend trying to “keep it fresh.” As such, mid-careerists for the purposes of this study are approximately 35 to 59 years of age, with at least 10 years experience in the arts and culture sector and 10 years before retirement. They bridge both the Baby Boomers on one side of the timeline and Generation X on the other and primarily hold executive, senior, and middle management positions in organizations of all sizes.

Research into mid-career issues, to balance my earlier peer group data, garnered few resources in the literature. The paradigm shifts brought about by the different work and lifestyle habits of Generations X and Y when compared to the Baby Boomers have been held as more immediate workplace concerns. They certainly have made for more interesting reading as the work ethics of the flip-flop wearing 20 and 30-somethings are compared to the workaholic 60-somethings. As a result, the effects of the generational transition in leadership and management have been more researched and reported, providing some evidence of the research hypotheses that those in the middle of the spectrum are getting lost in the shuffle. As Rebecca Borden, Manager of Professional Development at AFTA put it in a recent phone interview, “we have examined the two extremes of the career pipeline, but we have not looked at the pipe.”

One study published in *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) (Morison, Erikson, & Dychtwald, 2006) looked at the pipe and found that mid-careerists are “the most disaffected segment of the workforce” (p.79). The authors noted that “companies are ill-prepared to manage middlescence (3) because it is so pervasive, largely invisible and culturally uncharted” (p. 81). Further, the study asserted that, “companies need to find ways to rekindle the fires of this vast neglected group of people, or risk losing them” (p. 79). If this is true for corporate America, one could infer that it must have some validity in the nonprofit sector as well.

The Message and the Meaning

There are several messages drawn regarding the current and future state of leadership in nonprofit organizations. The research community has focused its stories and studies on the lack of qualified candidates for retiring nonprofit directors from the pool of Generations X and Y workers (Bell, Moyers & Wolfred, 2006; Dietrick, & Creaer, n.d) while the mid-careerists, who are chronologically next in line, have been deemed “burned out, bottlenecked and bored” (Morison et al, p. 79). This idea has explained some in our Las Vegas peer group who questioned whether or not they were interested in becoming executive directors. Many felt the stresses of middleage, and although seeking greater challenge, expressed concern that becoming an executive director will just be more of the same. All of this has led me to wonder what it means. What can be done to ensure the strength and stability of the arts and culture community if the largest segment of its workforce (mid-careerists) is under such stress and little information is available about their situation or how to address it?

In order to answer the question however, one must first understand who mid-career workers are and how relevant the assumption of burnout and disaffection is within the arts and culture sector. Findings from the research conducted to better understand mid-career arts and culture managers will be the subject of this, the first of two, CultureWork articles about mid-careerists in the nonprofit arts and culture workforce. The second article will further summarize the findings and consider how the arts and culture field at-large, as well as its supporting organizations, can strengthen its future by addressing the needs of its mid-career professionals.

The Research

To build on the Las Vegas peer group information and better understand the demographics, mind sets, and needs of arts and culture mid-careerists, Amy Kveskin Duncan (4) and I conducted an informal data gathering survey. The questions were designed to illuminate perceptions of job fulfillment, work-life challenges, networking, career transitions, and professional development needs. The results showed us a broad and varied set of characteristics that do not aggregate well. And while not all of those who are at mid-career have had the same professional experience, the data received through the survey sheds light on the experiences of a portion of the arts and culture workforce that is noteworthy based on its response to the survey.

Demographic

Using online software and viral networking (5), the survey was completed during a three week period in September, 2007 by 80 nonprofit arts and culture managers nationwide (and a few in the United Kingdom) who ranged in age from 35 to over 60.

- The largest age group represented was 35 - 39 (47%) with 34% representing the 40-50 year age group.
- Our sample was predominately white (82%), college educated (98%), and female (75%). This mirrored information provided in *Americans for the Arts' 2001 Local Arts Agency Salary and Benefits Survey* (2003, p.1).
- 69% have arts-related degrees (fine arts or administration).
- 31% started their career path as an artist and 26% started as an intern.
- 70% have worked in the arts and culture sector for more than 10 years and 34% for more than 20 years; the highest reported career length is 40 years.
- The average surveyed length of time in the sector is 17 years. The average length of time spent in a current position is 6 years.
- At the two extremes, nine people surveyed have been in their current position for less than one year and five for more than 20 years.
- Respondents either worked for public state or local arts agencies or they worked for private nonprofit arts and culture organizations.
- The median staff size was 16-20 people. Those surveyed in organizations with staffs of ten or fewer made up 39%.

The number of 35- to 39-year-old respondents (35 out of 80) captured our attention. It is unknown if this is an indication of the sector's age range overall, if more people in this age range were reached through viral networking, or if they were more comfortable with, and therefore more likely to, respond to an internet survey than the older survey recipients. Their seemingly young age, however, does not diminish the concerns about job satisfaction. According to a 2005 Conference Board survey, the largest decline in job satisfaction over the past ten years has occurred among workers between the ages of 35 and 44 (Morison et al, p. 80). This age group was approximately 81% of our survey respondents.

Education

The number with arts-related degrees was also notable. The breakdown shows that:

- 31% have fine arts degrees;
- 22% have "other arts related" degrees;
- 12% have arts administration degrees; and
- 12% stated they had both arts administration and fine arts degrees.

To understand some of the mid-careerist's concerns, it is important to understand a unique quality of the nonprofit arts sector in which people enter the administrative side as artists who take on office work as a day job to make ends meet while they pursue their artistic career. At one point for many, the day job unintentionally becomes a full-time career.

Thus, the larger number with fine arts degrees, as well as the number who started as artists, is important. Several in the peer group noted that as they became more immersed in the administrative needs of their jobs, they lost touch with their creativity and identity as an artist. Ironically, it was their role as an artist that led them into the field in the first place. While many currently come to arts administration work from fine arts beginnings, it is possible that future surveys will show a greater number of arts administration degrees as these programs continue to grow nationwide.

Job Positions

The positions held by mid-careerists range from executive or other top management to mid-level and coordinator positions. Those involved in the survey were:

- 48% Department Directors
- 33% Executive, Artistic, or Managing Directors
- 14% Coordinators or Assistant positions
- 5% Consultants

In the organizational hierarchy, executive, managing, and artistic directors are generally first tier managers, department directors are second tier, and coordinators/assistants are third tier. With 48% stating that they were in the second tier of leadership, the invisible mid-careerists are the backbone of the arts and culture workforce.

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction has been often linked to one's feeling that one's work is making a difference, that there is forward movement, and that one has what one needs (e.g. resources or skills) to do the job well. Furthermore, both corporate and nonprofit mid-careerists today were raised during a period of greater social consciousness in the 60s and 70s and many wanted to "change the world" through their careers. In middlecence they are now asking themselves if they can expect to have the impact that they desired to have (Morison et al, p. 80).

Similar to the Harvard Business Review (HBR) study, *Managing Middlecence*, we asked those surveyed about their level of job satisfaction and fulfillment. While there are no clear majorities here, the information generally corroborates the study. The HBR study identified career bottlenecks, work/life tension, burnout, and skills obsolescence as some sources of worker frustration (p. 81).

Using a different approach, our survey asked respondents what would bring them greater fulfillment rather than what was not creating satisfaction. Their top five responses were:

1. Increased leadership ability, professional autonomy and/or challenge;
2. Increased or more competitive salary and benefits;
3. Increased staff resources to better diversify the workload;
4. Increased opportunities for promotion within their current organization; and
5. Larger and more stable budgets that allow for new and more challenging programs.

While burnout was not specifically identified in our study as a concern, some of the causes of burnout for workers in the nonprofit sector can be associated with those things that our respondents said they wished were different in their work settings including: lower compensation and benefits packages, fewer organizational resources, and greater stresses from never-ending fundraising and later work hours due to required attendance at productions and events.

Sit Tight or Take Flight?

That said, on the whole, 85% of those surveyed felt a sense of job fulfillment, and 68% stated that they are not likely to leave the nonprofit arts and culture sector in the next three years. Seventy-five percent stated that they are not likely to change jobs in the next year.

This is slightly better in comparison to 43% of their corporate counterparts in the HBR study who indicated that they are passionate about their jobs, 40% who reported feelings of burnout, 20% who stated that they are looking for a new job and another 20% who defined a need for a major career change (p. 80). Because one's perspective on job fulfillment is highly subjective, our survey asked respondents to share a little more information. We found indications of dissatisfaction with select aspects of their jobs. When asked about their most pressing work-life challenges:

- 66% stated that they seek a better balance between time at work and personal time.
- 34% stated that they did not have the ability to move up in their current organization and they want greater professional responsibility.
- 28% said that they would like a change in their work situation but do not know what kind of change they are looking for.
- 26% stated that their work does not stimulate their intellectual interests and they would like more rewarding professional opportunities for growth.
- 12% stated that they are caring for their own children as well as their parents' needs and they feel stretched between work and home.
- 9% said that they have "...more responsibility in my current position and I don't know how to meet the challenge."
- 9% stated that they "...are very content and would not change a thing."

These findings affirmed the information from participants in the Las Vegas peer group. Many often used the word "transitional" to describe their current career stage.

Anecdotally, many indicated that they were preparing to move into a new career phase, but they were not sure what the future would look like. One person in the peer focus group stated, “I feel like I’m in a state of transition, but transition to what I don’t know.” Similarly, they used terms like “plateau” and “what’s next”; as in, “I have a fair amount of experience but I’m not sure what to do next.” The feelings of being at a plateau are likely due, in part, to having little upward mobility within their organization and wanting more professional stimulation in their current position. These feelings were consistent with our survey data reflecting mid-careerists’ desire for change but not being sure about what kind.

Kweskin Duncan and I worked with a pre-survey hypothesis that many mid-careerists are experiencing burnout, are not fulfilled in their work, and are at risk for leaving the non-profit arts and culture sector. The data, however clearly did not bear this out. In fact, as was noted, 85% are either fulfilled or very fulfilled on average and 68% are not interested in leaving the sector. Job change responses were highly mixed, indicating that 75% said they were ‘not likely’ to change jobs in the next 12 months, 55% not likely to change in the next two years, and 42% not likely to change in the next three years. By contrast 57% stated that they were either “likely or very likely” to change in the next three years and 45% in the next two years.

As people mature and become more enmeshed in family life and the need for economic stability to support it, as well as desiring a more settled lifestyle in general, they tend to change jobs less frequently. Moreover, several in the peer group indicated that although they were looking for something different, they were not sure if a job change would provide them with what they were looking for. The survey data show us that those who want to move up, for the most part, prefer to move up in their current organization. Several in the survey and in the peer group indicated that they want greater professional challenge with minimal risk. This information leads to the notion that at mid-career, people often wish for career stabilization while seeking new challenges. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to have both and people in all sectors often find that they have to relocate in order to gain position, income, or challenge. That people stay in this field in spite of their frustration indicates that the mid-careerists surveyed have a high level of tolerance for the more difficult aspects of the job and do not equate them with lack of fulfillment in their career.

Motivation Without Relocation

In a follow-up question to 60 people who provided email addresses in the otherwise “blind” survey process, mid-careerists were asked what kept them motivated to stay in their jobs despite the comparatively low compensation, long hours, and lack of human and financial resources. The response was not a surprise. People were motivated by the arts and culture community, their visions for a better world, and the role the arts can play in building that vision, their passion for creative thinking, the artistic process, and their

personal and professional missions to share that with others through their work. As one respondent replied:

I stay because this is a field I feel passionately about. I stay because I really feel I can make a meaningful difference in the world through my work in the arts. I stay because I believe the arts and artists deserve passionate, articulate, smart people working on their behalf. I stay because nearly all of the people I have encountered in my arts career have been genuinely good people trying to make a difference. And those things, for me, outweigh the tradeoffs and challenges encountered in this work. I strongly believe that if you are going to spend between 8 and 12 hours a day at work, you better believe in your core it is work worth doing and the people you surround yourself with are worth spending time with.

Given this research, we know that the arts and culture sector has a dedicated workforce that is willing to work under less than ideal conditions in exchange for a host of intrinsic rewards. That said, greater attention to the ways in which we can improve the conditions could go a long way towards alleviating some of the frustrations they experience and to ensure that they continue to provide their best work for the communities they serve. Our data suggest that mid-careerists are looking for new challenges and seeking renewal. We have identified some ways in which arts and culture workers can be re-energized and that their creativity can be tapped to help them find new life at mid-career. *CultureWork*, Winter 2008 will look at what some support organizations are doing to address flagging mid-careerists as well as provide suggestions for what others can do to help.

1. This is the first of a two part series. Part two will look at what some support organizations are doing to address flagging mid-careerists as well as provide suggestions for what others can do to help. This article will be published in the Winter 2008 issue of *CultureWork*. [[back to text](#)]

2. For more information about the distinct characteristics of Baby Boomers, and Generations X and Y, see Saunders previous article for *Culturework* titled *Boomers, XY and the Making of a Generational Shift in Arts Management* at <http://aad.uoregon.edu/culturework/culturework35a.html>. [[back to text](#)]

3. A term used extensively in HBR's report *Managing Middlecence* to describe the phenomenon of restlessness and disaffection that can negatively influence mid-career employee attitudes and experiences (p.79). [[back to text](#)]

4. Amy Kveskin Duncan is an international non-profit business development consultant

and leadership coach who manages several related blogs through her website (<http://www.artsmanagementconsulting.com>) including <http://www.careergoals.blogspot.com>. [[back to text](#)]

5. Similar in concept to viral marketing, viral networking refer to techniques that use pre-existing social networks to share information. In this case, a Zoomerang survey link (<http://www.zoomerang.com/>) was shared with colleagues via an email message. They then voluntarily passed it along via email to their colleagues, who shared it within their networks and so on. While not a pure or scientific means of data gathering, viral networking enables response from a wide range of recipients within a given network in a short amount of time. [[back to text](#)]

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