



Ending a Peak Work Experience: The Impacts of Sudden Termination

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ABSTRACT

This is a descriptive study of nine middle-aged male executives who were suddenly and involuntarily displaced from roles that they looked back upon as peak work experiences. Positive and negative factors in the transitions of these subjects are discussed. The most forceful findings reported in this study relate to emotional growth, newfound vulnerability, and the importance of maintaining balance between personal and professional concerns. Six of the subjects in this study indicated that recovery from the negative impact of sudden termination from a peak work experience took more than three years. Personal traits such as self-confidence and a positive attitude were considered to be the most important factors in recovery. None of these subjects indicated unqualified willingness to accept another peak work experience. These findings suggest that, if a peak work experience ends badly, the affected executive will seek out a distinctly different type of work situation to assist himself in moving on, and will manage the subsequent peak experience differently, based on the learnings from his prior, very painful experience.

Introduction

Many firms have responded to increasing globalization and intensified business competition during the past decade by restructuring and downsizing. This has created unprecedented levels of unemployment for senior white-collar workers. Many displaced executives are well-educated, mid-life individuals whose expectations of being at their professional, career, and earnings peaks at this stage of life are dashed. Today's leaner organizations offer fewer opportunities and create more difficulty for them in finding meaningful new work roles.

The purpose of this exploratory study is to present insights that could be helpful to such individuals, to their organizations, and to those who are supporting them through the resulting transition process. Nine middle-aged executives who comprised a homogeneous sample participated in in-depth, eight-hour interviews to generate the data for this study. Each of these individuals was terminated from a position of significant responsibility, and their peak work experiences are viewed from varied theoretical perspectives.



Theoretical Perspectives On Peak Experience

Perhaps the broadest definition of peak performance is that presented by Burleson (1999) as simply living one's life in the way one would like. More recently, Messmer (2001) defines the peak performer from an organizational perspective as "someone who is recognized for consistently maintaining high productivity levels and going above and beyond expectations."

Privette's (1986) characterized definition that peak performance is as having characterized by clarity of process and focus, which included a "sense of self and power." Garfield (1987) and May (1988) essentially agree with Privette in seeing peak performers as goal-oriented drivers who seek out ever increasing levels of personal significance. Such feelings of power and significance (Shutz 1994) are most likely produced by the psychological process hypothesized as "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Jackson & Roberts, 1993). Jackson and Roberts (1993) assert that the quest to experience the pleasurable emotion associated with flow underlies the mastery orientation observed in peak performers. Goleman (1995) concurred with this view by suggesting that flow engendered a supreme emotion felt by people who were performing at the height of their abilities and which in turn brought deep levels of meaning to their lives. This vital sense of personal meaning inherent to a peak work experience has been described earlier by other noted writers on the subject including Csikszentmihalyi (1990), Frankl (1985), Garfield (1987), and Senge (1990).

While many authors confine their remarks to individual performance and contribution, the early work of Trist and Bamforth (1951), Zander (1977), and Dyer (1977), looked at the possibility that peak experiences and personal meaning could be found in work groups. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) continued this mode of thought and noted, "how exhilarating it is to be part of a well-trained team that functions smoothly and efficiently." Subsequently, Katzenbach and Smith (1993) observed similar occurrences for people working within high performing teams. Accordingly, Senge comments that, "When you ask people about what it is like being part of a great team, what is most striking is the meaningfulness of the experience. People talked about being part of something larger than themselves, of being connected, of being generative. It becomes quite clear that, for many, their experiences as part of truly great teams stand out as singular periods of life lived to the fullest. Some spend the rest of their lives looking for ways to recapture that spirit" (1990, p.13).

Theories of Human Development

Theories of human development also provide a context for understanding personal identity and growth issues that may become salient with work-related crises. For example, a peak performer may be terminated during Erik Erikson's (1963) Generativity, or mid-life, stage. This would suggest that the termination experience may impact an individual's need to nurture the next generation. Alternatively, termination may occur in Erikson's eighth and final stage, Ego Identity, which may make it more difficult for an individual to find a sense of personal meaning and rightness with the world.

The male developmental model posited by Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee (1979), noted a tendency in the Middle Adulthood stage, between ages 45 and 60, to redistribute



the time invested in career, family, relationships, and other activities pursued for reasons of creativity and fulfillment. As this stage begins, a man must deal with the disparity between what he is and what he had dreamed of becoming. Oftentimes, a significant event or turning point in his life triggers this reappraisal. The resulting process can be painful but holds the potential for self-renewal and greater satisfaction in his own life and those of the people around him.

A third model (Sheehy, 1976) proposed a stage referred to as the Deadline Decade, typically from the late 30s to mid-40s, that could be viewed as a time of personal crisis causing reassessment of one's life and accomplishments. This stage can instigate personal growth and change as people decide what they truly want in life. The outcome of this reassessment leads to a Renewal or Resignation stage, from the mid-40s to age 50, whereby successful re-establishment of life purpose, relationships, and interests leads to a sense of renewal while fear and avoidance of change lead to resignation.

Change, Transition, and Loss Theory

Theories of change (Lewin, 1951), transition (van Gennup [trans. 1960]; Bridges, 1980), and loss (Kübler-Ross, 1969) were examined for insights into the individual-level change processes addressed by this study.

Lewin's model of change encompassed three phases: first, an Unfreezing stage, often triggered by introducing conflicting information (such as a shocking termination) that reduces the strength of factors maintaining the system's behavior; a Moving stage, where the system's behavior shifts because of new behavioral requirements and structural and process changes (as in personal and professional transitions); and a Refreezing stage where it stabilizes at a new state of equilibrium through supporting mechanisms (such as a new role and new behaviors).

Bridges' (1980) model of personal and work-related transitions consisted of three phases called Separation, Transition, and Incorporation. The separation ceremony dealt with leaving a familiar social context and going through a symbolic death experience. It was followed by a transitional period of social isolation to allow inner change to take place. When these inner changes had occurred, the individual was reintegrated into the social order on a new basis called incorporation.

Bridges' model, as with van Gennup's and Lewin's, encompassed three phases: the Ending, the Neutral Zone, and the New Beginning. In the context of work and job loss, the ending stage dealt with efforts at disengagement, disidentification, and disenchantment, culminated in disorientation, and led into the second stage. The neutral zone was associated with feelings of being lost and empty, and was used to discover what the individual wanted out of life and to cultivate receptivity to a new beginning. This new beginning, the third stage of his model, began inside of people as they started translating their thoughts into action with a desired end result clearly in mind.

The adjustment process that people with terminal illness experience also offers analogies to the loss and transition process addressed by this study. Kübler-Ross (1969) defined a process composed of distinct emotional and cognitive stages including: initial shock and denial which



serve as buffering mechanisms; anger, perhaps coupled with resentment or rage as reality begins to sink in; bargaining, often with God, to gain more time; depression, as death can no longer be denied; and finally, acceptance. In a reemployment context, an additional stage would encompass growth resulting from redefining life and career goals.

Health Effects of Transition

Finally, research on stress and typical health-related effects of transition can help to surface the potential for negative health outcomes associated with job termination. Previous studies confirm that job loss places people at increased risk of depression, anxiety, and minor psychiatric morbidity, and decreased self-esteem and life satisfaction (Caplan, Vinokur, Price, & van Ryn, 1989). Involuntary terminations of any kind carry the potential for these consequences to occur; regardless of organizational level achieved.

A number of writers (Ward, 1996; McLoughlin et al., 1983; Finley, 1981) note that executive terminations can entail additional severity, particularly when the executive believes he/she is experiencing the psycho-emotional feelings of flow associated with a peak work experience.

Other researchers have reported that mid-life individuals who are suddenly displaced from meaningful roles, who face a difficult job market and, perhaps, other personal and financial difficulties, can be expected to suffer more stress and related physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual health effects than younger people (Hepworth, 1980; Leana & Ivancevich, 1987).

With specific regard to executive termination, Dimola (2000) writes that it can be expected that an individual who has integrated—or further—welded his/her identity into the work role would experience a shattering disruption to the self. Stimson (1995) believes that such people experience a subjective death. Both researchers observed that fired executives sought on the one hand to redefine life's meaning, and on the other, to introduce more balance into their lives. Often this search was accompanied by an interest in spirituality and a larger sense of self.

The Research Approach

This study gathered details of each subject's unique experience and examined the data in order to surface patterns or themes. The study focused on the peak work experience and its loss, the subsequent career outcome, and the transitional process resulting from the loss. Specific questions posed included:

1. What were the respondents' peak work experiences and how do they describe and characterize their experiences?
2. How did they obtain the roles?
3. Was the peak experience an individual effort, a team effort, or some combination?
4. How and when did the ending come about?
5. What did they learn through their peak experiences?
6. What are the respondents doing now, and how do they feel about it?



7. What reasons or considerations were involved in deciding to do what they are doing today?
8. How do they feel about having another peak work experience?
9. What were their transition processes like?
10. How do they describe and characterize impacts to their lifestyles?
11. What factors helped and hindered the process?
12. How long did the transition process take?
13. What other life and health impacts were associated with their transitions?
14. What did they learn as a consequence of their transitions?

The Sample

The essential criteria established for inclusion in the research sample were:

1. An executive level work experience within the past decade that the subjects themselves characterized as a peak work experience.
2. A sudden and involuntary ending of their relationships with the organizations in which their peak experiences occurred.
3. The peak work loss and resulting transition process must have occurred within their mid-life years, specifically between ages 40 to 60 years.
4. Financial obligations requiring a return to paid work after their terminations.
5. The willingness, even enthusiasm, to share personal and still sensitive stories of loss and transition; to schedule time to complete in-depth interviews and diagnostic tools; to allow the researcher to tape their interviews; and to sign a consent agreement.

Participants were assured of anonymity in the study report so that their stories could unfold naturally and without concern about using actual names, discussing health-related aspects of their transitions, or disappointments in their closest relationships. Subject confidentiality requirements and additional limitations applied to the criteria listed above (such as gender and minimum elapsed time since termination), resulted in the sample size of nine executives described here.

The research sample consisted of six Canadians and three Americans, each working within their national jurisdictions. All subjects were married males at a median age of 46 years and with two or three dependent children when terminated. A third of the subjects' wives worked outside the home in professional capacities, at least on a part-time basis. All nine subjects had completed undergraduate degrees and six had completed master's degrees in business administration. Industry sectors represented within the sample included financial services, retailing, high technology, food processing, and public health. The organizational roles that provided the peak experiences included three chief executive officers, two executive vice-presidents, and four functional vice-presidents or business unit leaders. Only three subjects actively pursued the positions that became their peak roles, two as internal opportunities and the other external, while the other six were called upon or recruited by the organizations involved.



Peak Experience Analysis

Early in the initial interviews, the subjects were asked to spontaneously describe or characterize their peak experiences. Each offered a variety of qualitative descriptors that were most valued or memorable to them, as illustrated in Table 1 below. These characteristics were also analyzed by order (salience) and by frequency (importance) of mention. While the order and frequency of mention varied by respondent, there was a degree of consistency across the sample. The most defining characteristics were: the opportunity for meaningful achievement, impact and results; for creativity; for autonomy; and for fun and enjoyment within an environment characterized by teamwork, excitement, and challenge.

Table 1
Comparisons of Defining Characteristics

Source Descriptors and References			Study Participants' Descriptors
Frankl (1985)	Garfield (1987)	Senge (1990)	
Personal meaning & meaningfulness, actualizes potential meaning in situation, congruent with ideals and values	Excitement and meaning; intense commitment to a compelling mission	Meaningfulness; its spirit	Very exciting Energizing; felt he had to make a difference quickly Not like a job; personal fit to role; meaningful service; felt blessed; found his mission Excitement of a start-up; most exciting period of his life A stunning experience, its richness, no situation with more need for him; such an attractive agenda for him; just no place he would rather be It was much more than a job to me A very exciting and rewarding time



			We were on a mission, we were; it was so good We were far and away the best, knew what we were doing and very proud of what we achieved
Selflessness	Standing out while standing in; looks for synergies to leverage results	Common goals, profound teamwork, trust, intelligence, complementarity	Had a good team Strong sense of belonging, of teamwork; internalized the business operation Complementarity Picked own team; team cohesion; mutual support and confidence; knew what to do instinctively Building team, its courage, spirit, expertise, mutual respect, creativity, soundness, practicality, complementarity Working as a team with other people running international business units; sharing ideas, learnings
Responsibility Self-determining	Meeting challenges, acting decisively, internal decision to excel		The challenge Intense; frenzied; urgency; ruthless for results Challenging; exhausting Quite frenzied; driven; stressful Challenge



			The accountability & responsibility Volatility driven by daily market activity; a freewheeling environment; very busy and focused; we were at the crest of a wave
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Rich in joy and love	Enjoyment, enthusiasm	Singular periods of life lived to the fullest	A terrific time; a very fun, great period A great deal of fun; exciting; loved his clients; loved their appreciation of him A lot of fun, exciting; very heady So much fun; a literally euphoric experience; a great place to be Confidante relationship with visionary chairman; supported a true leader Long-standing, close friendship with his boss Boss was an outstanding mentor; appreciated each other; worked very well together
A monument to his existence	Impact, achievement, results, contribution	Extraordinary results, capacity for coordinated action	A real sense of accomplishment; broke all records



			Ability to influence outcomes Effectiveness Made significant contributions to the organization The scope and impact; accomplishment; did things he never thought he would Remarkable, sustained impact he had; touched that he is so missed by people there
Independence (or autonomy)	Standing out while standing in	Being connected	Left alone to do own thing Sense of freedom Free rein in developmental role Autonomy from parent firms; flexibility Autonomy; had free hand; not second-guessed by parent company Richness of virtually unlimited impact The freedom to act in an executive and an entrepreneurial way; freedom to operate, build own group



Innovative, inventive, creative activity	Creativity, innovation, and calculated risk-taking	Being generative	Creative; innovative; outside the box; did it differently; new territory; broke new ground Creative Breaking barriers Unique, start-from-scratch experience; creative Team's creativity Experimenting in different areas; bringing new products to market
Individual growth	Self-development; growth by achievement; attention to quality, feedback, course correction, skills transfer; open to opportunity, change, and growth	Rapid growth	Exposure to best practices; brilliant people around him Stimulating; high learning and professional growth Learning from other country managers, looking at different opportunities, incorporating best practices Stimulating; intellectual challenge of learning a new area I traveled a lot globally and met very interesting people

The individual contributor and team member aspects of their peak experiences were addressed through direct and indirect lines of inquiry. When asked directly, five recalled their experiences primarily as individual contributors, while the other four recalled them either as having both elements in more balance or as exclusively a team effort. The indirect line of questioning revealed a stronger emphasis on the individual contributor aspect. The analysis indicated that the characteristics deemed most significant (meaningful achievement, creativity, autonomy, enjoyment) applied primarily to the individual contributor aspect.



The duration of peak experience varied from a minimum of one and a half years to a maximum of six. Median and modal values were both four years. In six of nine cases, the duration of peak experience was less than the total tenure in those roles.

The subjects reported a range of factors involved in the sudden and involuntary endings of their peak experiences. Five reported a change of incumbent in the role of chairman or chief executive officer as the precipitating factor. Specific causes for termination included a lack of support for strategies or agendas the subjects were leading, weak relationships with new and/or other powerful players, conflicting styles and preferences, or being viewed as a threat to a new superior or peers. Other rationales cited included burnout leading to a loss of confidence by a superior, a formal complaint alleging harassment from a staff member, displacement through corporate restructuring, and direct control asserted over a subsidiary by its parent company.

The expression “warning time” refers to the amount of time the subjects had to independently recognize the continued viability of their roles as questionable. Two reported that they were taken completely by surprise, four reported periods of between two days and two weeks in which to recognize the possibility of termination, and three reported in hindsight a range of five to eight months in which warning signals appeared, although at the time they could not see them, nor accept and deal with the circumstances proactively.

Through their peak experiences, all subjects became more aware of their strengths and limitations, interests, abilities, and preferences. They also became more knowledgeable about managing within the organizations of which they were part. While all derived valuable insights from their peak experiences, these were largely unique to the individuals and situations involved. Five out of nine realized that creating or building a business was much more satisfying than maintaining one, and losing their peak experiences taught them that breaking new ground and achieving record results are not enough...effective working relationships are critical.

Current State Analysis

In examining the subjects’ post-peak career roles, maintaining family stability appeared to be a primary consideration. Two subjects are now living and working in different states because family stability took precedence over geography and all other factors in their career decision-making. The other seven subjects saw no reason to make a geographic move or deliberately chose to stay in the same region for reasons of family stability and business contacts. In comparing geographic locale, industry sector, nature of role, and work environment, at least two of these aspects differed in all cases, and three or four aspects differed for the majority. All nine moved to different work environments such as from a large bank to a small firm.

Seven of the nine have quite different roles now, and at least seven are working in clearly different industry sectors. Three chose to become external consultants, though only one had significant subject experience at the time, and two became entrepreneurs. The pattern here is clearly away from repeating the peak experience and organizational or role characteristics that would serve as painful reminders of it; in fact, two subjects reported that they consciously and deliberately rejected potential new roles that seemed too similar to those that provided their peak work experiences.



The subjects' rationales for choosing their new roles reflected differing priorities such as restoring or maintaining family stability, gaining control over their professional and financial destiny, finding personal fit to a role, and avoiding painful reminders. For a third of the subjects, family stability took precedence over all other considerations in their decision-making.

All subjects reported being somewhat to very satisfied with their current roles, but not one considered his current role to be of the same quality as his peak work experience when interviewed. Feelings of satisfaction, or perhaps contentment, with their current roles derived from achieving other objectives such as restoring family stability, gaining control over career and financial outcomes, and establishing more balanced lifestyles.

None of the subjects gave an unqualified affirmative response to the question of wanting another peak experience: three would not repeat it, four would repeat it but would manage the experience differently, and two were not ready or able to invest the emotional energy required.

Change or Transition Process Analysis

Duration of the transition process refers not to the elapsed time it took to land a new work role but to the time it took to stop feeling disoriented, to start enjoying life again, and to feel comfortable and competent in a new role and environment. Three of the nine subjects reported the duration of their post-peak transition processes to be three years or less; the balance reported periods in excess of three years. Two were not convinced they had completed their transitions yet despite elapsed times of up to six years. In the latter case, the transition may be more prolonged due to the circumstances involved (simultaneous changes from internal, salaried management to external, independent consultant with the absence of both extended severance pay and a second family income.)

Subjects reported that the transition processes significantly impacted marital and family relationships. In seven cases, open and ongoing dialogue between the partners about the transition's emotional and other effects facilitated the process while enriching the marriage. These men are happier with their marriages now than before their transitions and four reported improved relationships with their children. However, two subjects reported marital deterioration stemming from poor communications between the partners triggered by a perceived lack of spousal understanding, help, and support.

Eight of nine subjects were provided with severance arrangements (two modest and six generous) which enabled them to maintain their lifestyles during part or all of the period in which they were not earning income. Two subjects reported serious financial consequences in the second and subsequent years of their transitions. One talked of the "financial freefall" after his severance pay was depleted while another still laments losing the family home. Four subjects were most concerned about the impacts to their retirement incomes, security, and lifestyles.

Factors recalled by the subjects as helpful to their post-peak transitions were analyzed by frequency (importance) and order (salience) of mention, and by direct reference as the single most pivotal factor (determinance). The results are summarized below in Table 2.



Table 2
Summary Comparison of Helping Factors

Helping Factor	Frequency of Mention (Importance)	Order of Mention (Salience)	Identified as Pivotal (Determinant)
Participant 1	Outplacement	Family: wife	Self-confidence
Participant 2	Outplacement	Family: wife	Wife
Participant 3	Family	Family: children	Faith
Participant 4	Family	Other people: talks with mentor	Superordinate goal
Participant 5	Outplacement	Outplacement Counselor	Outplacement
Participant 6	Self	Self: personal strength	Other people: trusted friend
Participant 7	Outplacement	Outplacement Counselor	Self: Attitude
Participant 8	Other factors	Family: stable, secure environment	Prior proxy experience
Participant 9	Self	Other activities	Other people: senior contacts

The importance measure revealed that factors originating with the self (a positive attitude, self-esteem, and self-confidence) were important for the sample as a whole. Other important factors included access to outplacement facilities and services, the emotional support of a family member or trusted friend, other non-work activities, and regular physical exercise.

The salience measure revealed that support from within the immediate family or a trusted friend was of most help to five subjects, while outplacement support was referenced first by two, and personal strength and other activities were referenced first by the remaining two subjects. Over half of the salient factors mentioned reflected the understanding, help, and support received from various others within and outside the family.

The determinance measure revealed a different pivotal factor in each case. These included self-confidence, the help and support of a wife who was a social worker, spiritual faith, a superordinate goal (family stability), a highly regarded outplacement consultant, a trusted and supportive work colleague, diligent networking, a prior proxy experience supporting a close friend through termination and transition, and active assistance by senior level contacts. In reviewing importance, salience, and determinant helping factors in total, it was clear that the



subjects relied on a variety of supports to help them through their transitions including the emotional support of family and friends, some means of recovering their balance and self-confidence as quickly as possible, and valued outplacement consulting support.

Factors recalled by the subjects as hindering their post-peak transitions were analyzed by frequency (importance) and order (salience) of mention, and are summarized below in Table 3. Interestingly, the same factors referenced as the most important aids in their transitions were also seen as the most important hindrances. First, factors originating with the self (own personality, attitudes, and reactions) comprised 63% of all mentions, and were referenced by all nine subjects. Second, inadequacies of outplacement and reemployment services comprised 16% of all mentions, and were referenced by six of the eight subjects with such services. The salience measure revealed the self as the primary hindering factor for seven subjects, while family concerns were most salient for two.

Table 3
Summary Comparison of Hindering Factors

Hindering Factors	Frequency of Mention (Importance)	Order of Mention (Salience)
Participant 1	Self	Self: difficulty asking for help
Participant 2	Self	Self: own personality
Participant 3	Self	Self: fear
Participant 4	Self	Self: entitlement attitude
Participant 5	Self	Other: distracted by geographic move
Participant 6	Self	Family: wife not helpful/difficult
Participant 7	Self	Self: self-induced pressure to replace income quickly
Participant 8	Self	Self: delaying job search
Participant 9	Self	Self: entitlement attitude

With respect to physical health, eight of the nine subjects maintained or increased their physical activity during the transition, and some improved their nutrition with the result that they were in better physical condition than before termination. None saw a physician after termination because no need was seen at that time. Two did seek subsequent medical attention during their transitions for negative health effects such as emergence of acute arthritis or new allergies.



The subjects had more to say about mental health difficulties, and seven had poignant stories to tell. They recalled a variety of reactions to their situations including shock, memory blockages (still in effect eight years later), grief, anger (continuing), bitterness, feelings of abandonment and betrayal, mood swings, low self-esteem, feelings of fear and failure, social withdrawal, self-focus, continuous self-talk and self-criticism, distraction, crying, depression, lethargy, reduced enjoyment of life, loss of interest in hobbies, loss of identity, feelings of disorientation, inability to make decisions and take action, chronic insomnia, and anxiety attacks.

Subjects reported newfound humility, vulnerability, sensitivity, and a greater desire to maintain family stability in the wake of their transitions. Subjects also reported positive and negative insights into spouses, children, friends, and associates while experiencing the pain and trauma of separating from an organizational family. Key learnings about surviving at the top included: the danger of merging one's personal identity with the organization's; the need to shed false notions of indispensability; the emotional and psychological tolls that organizations take on people; and the necessity of being more self-interested and prepared for such an eventuality. The single positive reflection by subjects was the satisfaction of seeing the lasting effects of their work as a personal legacy and as a tribute to co-workers and the organization itself.

Issues and Recommendations

Organizations seeking the higher levels of productivity and effectiveness associated with peak experience can facilitate it by providing a compelling organizational mission and working conditions that enable people to achieve peak performance both as individuals and as members of high performing teams. Approaches to employee involvement and empowerment that provide skills training, knowledge and information, power and authority to make decisions and take action, appear to facilitate peak performance (Lawler, 1986). The findings suggest that conditions for peak performance can be stimulated within flat organization structures by providing more internal development opportunities to interested employees. Special projects, ad hoc task forces, and rotation of individual and team-based roles broaden perspectives while leveraging experience and skills, stimulating creativity, and simultaneously addressing a variety of individual-level growth and fulfillment needs. However, the findings of this study reveal that individuals engaged in peak work experiences must be wary of the potentially deleterious effects of such experiences and take personal action to avoid such effects. Similarly, organizational authorities should also be wary of the downside of peak work experience and put in place appropriate preventative measures. These issues and associated recommendations for individuals and organizations are discussed below and summarized in Table 4.

Table 4
Summary Issues and Recommendations

Issues	Recommendations
<i>Individual Effects</i>	<i>Individual Strategies</i>
· Loss of Balance and Perspective	· Use self-discipline in work-life balance



· Extended work hours · Skipping vacations · Overstated Sense of Contribution · False Sense of Security · Safety · Indispensability · Disregard of Warning Signs · Organization as Surrogate Family · Role as Surrogate Parent	· Enlist a trusted colleague for support · Use a coach or personal advisory board · Pre-pay vacations; ask for explicit direction to take vacation · Build, maintain social support system · Cultivate outside interests, activities · Proxy experience to support a colleague · Solicit feedback to overcome blind spots · Check perceptions with advisor · Avoid nights, weekends at work · Nurture gratifying non-work relationships · Negotiate regular reassignments · Keep termination provisions current
<i>Organizational Practices</i> · Executive/Management Development	<i>Organizational Strategies</i> · Promote work-life skills for executives · personal life management plan · termination training, sensitization · personal termination planning · stress management · power and politics at work · how to support terminated colleagues



• Health & Wellness • Staffing and Reassignment Practices • Termination Practices	• ongoing developmental dialogue and feedback • Educate and build awareness • Promote outside interests, activities • Require regular role re-assignment • Provide challenges of different roles • Adopt gradual process vs. unexpected • Support with a consultative role, project • Provide therapeutic, financial counseling • Address recovery time in severance • Offer choice of outplacement suppliers
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Individual-Level Issues and Recommendations

Peak work experiences appear to entail unique psychological effects which merit attention from the individuals involved and from leaders and close colleagues. These effects can be characterized as a loss of balance, an overstated sense of personal contribution, a false sense of security, disregard of warning signs of termination, viewing the organization as a surrogate family, and adoption of a surrogate parent role. Knowing that these phenomena can occur enables the individual to take proactive measures to avoid or mitigate these effects, and suggests counteractive measures that can be taken to save the peak performer from derailing.

Loss of Balance

The intensity and demands (self-imposed or otherwise) of a peak work experience can cause the individual to pursue a business agenda with such focus and drive that he or she loses sight of other important aspects of life such as health, family, and relationships. Over time, such single-mindedness may lead to the loss of perspective and judgment that a more balanced lifestyle can provide. Most of the subjects in this study learned the importance of maintaining balance the hard way and, once they had re-established it, sought to retain it through their choice of new career roles. This finding supports the developmental literature (Levinson et al., 1979) that, at mid-life, the individual can normally be expected to redistribute the time and energy invested in career, family, relationships, and other interests for reasons of personal fulfillment. Because the satisfaction and fulfillment derived through peak experiences appear to cause people to disregard spheres outside of work, this finding underscores the need for self-discipline in ensuring appropriate work-life balance. It also suggests that individuals in peak roles need an



interested party, such as their leader, human resources consultant, or a trusted colleague to provide reminders of the deleterious effects of continuously extending work hours and postponing vacations. Educational and awareness-building initiatives undertaken within corporate wellness programs can be very helpful. Explicit direction to take vacations and engage in non-work activities may be necessary as well.

Overstated Sense of Self-Contribution

Satisfaction of human needs for competence, achievement, growth, affiliation, and power, and other associated intrinsic rewards from peak work experience may lead the individual to an overstated sense of his or her effectiveness, value, and power within the organization, and a sense of invulnerability and/or indispensability to the organization involved. These intrinsic rewards may be so motivating as to cause exhaustion of physical and psychological resources. Disregarding a social support system while in urgent pursuit of the business agenda can lead to ill health, burnout, and deteriorating relationships. Upon sudden, involuntary termination, the effects can be devastating.

Peak performers can make conscientious efforts to get feedback, thereby reducing the blind spots that lead to termination. Education and development programs can be provided that deal with work-life skills such as career self-management, stress management, power and politics in the workplace, and training and sensitization to termination. As executives move up in an organization, the subject of termination becomes a subject of increasing importance that can be addressed from a variety of perspectives. Topics for discussion could include how best to terminate a staff member, how to support and help a former colleague who has been terminated, and how to personally prepare for the processes of termination and transition.

False Sense of Security

When a sudden, involuntary termination concludes a peak work experience, the effect can be traumatic and disorienting for the individual. The intensity, achievement, and enjoyment associated with the peak work experience can heighten self-perceptions of indispensability to the organization and generate a strong but false sense of psychological safety and employment security. The impact of a sudden, unexpected, and involuntary termination can be so unsettling that protective psychological reactions like shock continue to operate to protect him or her from painful memories years later. Peak performers can build psychological protection from such unfortunate outcomes through a proxy experience such as supporting a close colleague through his or her transition. Such experience provides a realistic preview of the process and its emotional and psychological effects thereby sensitizing the peak performer to the possibility of termination and providing the stimulus for proactive personal and career management.

Where immediate termination of an individual engaged in a peak work experience is unavoidable, the likely emotional and psychological consequences need to be taken into account, and qualified professional resources engaged. Ideally, the termination would not be an unexpected event but the culmination of a number of candid discussions about the reasons for concluding the role and/or relationship, and exploration of alternative and less drastic means of



resolving the situation. Suggestions could include reassignment or establishing a consultative relationship.

Disregard of Warning Signs

This study suggests that the peak work experience may entail a “halo effect” that clouds the reasoning and judgment of the executive, causing him or her to ignore or disregard warning signs of impending termination. In such cases, an individual may avoid seeking guidance and stay with an organization or role longer than advisable. Again, an interested party, such as a human resources consultant or a trusted colleague, can provide helpful assistance through objective observation and feedback.

Organization as Surrogate Family

Longer-tenured executives engaged in peak work experiences are more likely to have merged their personal identities with those of their organizations, and to consider their organization as “family.” Some executives may invest more time, energy, and attention over the years in their organizational families than in their actual immediate families. Hence, the disorienting effects of being cast off by his or her organizational “family” can persist for years beyond termination.

For those executives charged with creating and building a new business, the metaphor of child rearing seems apt. From conception or planning through birth or start-up, through nurturance, guidance, and growth into adulthood, the business can come to be viewed by the executive as his/her “child.” Disruption of that relationship after several years may be as gut wrenching as losing a real child.

Peak performers can assume responsibility for ensuring that deep, affectionate ties remain vital within their family relationships. To guard against misplaced loyalties, they can ensure that gratifying relationships exist elsewhere. It may be prudent to consider regular rotation of the role of “parent” to a new business, and other strategies that reinforce the notion of being a temporary “foster parent,” thus avoiding the individual and organizational difficulties associated with such strong attachments.

Organizational-Level Issues and Recommendations

Executive and Management Development

The subjects in this study poignantly recalled a variety of negative outcomes from their unexpected and involuntary terminations. These outcomes included a broad range of negative psychological effects, marital and family difficulties, financial problems, and acute health effects. Given these unfortunate outcomes, the peak performer might view himself or herself as an asset worthy of careful management. Formulating and maintaining a personal management plan that addresses key areas of life such as health, relationships, career, and non-work interests would seem prudent. Developing lead and alternative or contingency strategies to accomplish life goals in each area would help to build greater resilience and adaptability to changing



circumstances. Soliciting feedback from family, friends, and close work associates would assist in identifying blind spots and correcting them promptly. Personal feedback may also be available from a mentor, executive coach, or a personal advisory board comprised of trusted individuals. Ongoing developmental dialogue and feedback sessions, sanctioned as a regular organizational practice, would provide the peak performer with the opportunity for proactive self-management.

Health and Wellness

Through proactive education and awareness building initiatives, associated organizational investments in health and wellness, and leadership role modeling, organizations can promote and legitimize a well-rounded lifestyle. Individual organizational members would be encouraged and supported by the organization to maintain the strong personal and professional networks, family stability, outside non-work interests, and robust mental health that can forestall or counteract the negative effects of peak work experiences.

Staffing and Reassignment Practices

Consistent with Garfield's (1987) research on peak performers, the mid-life individuals in this study pursued quite different roles in different types of organizations after their peak work experiences. Garfield found that peak performers regularly transfer their skills from one field to another. This tendency aligns with Maslow's assertion that the more one engages in self-actualizing behaviors, the more one will pursue such opportunities. The subjects in this research expressed a variety of rationales for pursuing their new directions, including the opportunity of fresh challenges in new arenas that capitalized on their accumulated skills and experience and leveraged their strengths and interests. This study's findings suggest that greater consideration be given to individuals who have had peak work experience, have learned from it, and are inclined toward new work situations and challenges. These individuals need new roles that are sufficiently different to allow for expanding their professional and personal growth and fulfillment needs, and to assist them in moving forward after a very difficult and painful experience.

Termination Practices

In view of the negative effects of termination found in this study, organizations would be well-advised to adopt more humane and considered approaches to concluding an individual's peak work experience so that his or her self-esteem and internal motivation to excel are neither dampened nor destroyed. Some suggestions for efficacious management practices follow.

Preview of Impending Termination

In instances where involuntary termination appears to be the necessary organizational response, initiating an early and candid discussion between the leader and the peak performer regarding the issues and concerns is advisable. Hopefully, such a process will allow sufficient time for the peak performer to adjust to the impending reality, to plan for the future, and to feel supported by the organization.



Therapeutic Counseling

The mental health effects of sudden termination on the subjects in the sample suggest that, where no option to immediate termination is feasible, management should take into account the likely health outcomes and plan accordingly. The findings of this study suggest that provision should be made for immediate and continuing therapeutic counseling services as part of the termination arrangements in order to protect and preserve the individual's mental health, marital and family relationships, and the ability to regain and satisfactorily perform a comparable new role.

Financial Advice

Knowing that the typical post-peak transition process of the mid-life subjects in this sample was of four years' duration, a number of other implications arise in planning such terminations. Long-tenured executives may not have negotiated specific termination arrangements when hired by their organizations or may have neglected to keep the provisions current. For people over 40 years of age, severance case law does reflect larger awards, but organizations would be advised to err on the side of generosity when determining severance pay and benefits for mid-life employees being separated from a peak work experience.

Outplacement Services

Expectations of outplacement or reemployment firms contracted to assist the executive after termination and to help him or her land a new role should reflect the difficult realities of the situation. For mid-life, post-peak executives, the transition process does not end upon reemployment. In fact, an executive may not be able to land an appropriate new role for some time, or at all. The findings of this study suggest that organizations should offer a choice of suppliers with proven abilities to help executives recover their self-esteem, manage the emotional impact of termination, and conduct a realistic assessment of personal goals and interests.

Conclusion

For the subjects in this study, the termination and transition process following a peak work experience could be characterized as a painful journey of personal and professional change. It appeared that their terminations, however unwelcome, did serve as "unfreezing" mechanisms causing them to become more open to change, more self-aware and receptive to personal feedback, more focused on their relationships and outside interests, and more careful in executing personal and professional changes. Those subjects who made these changes claim to like themselves better now and all appear to have extracted some benefit from their suffering through learning and applying valuable life lessons.

Within organizations, both peak performers and their leaders are advised to watch for the danger signals that indicate a peak performance may be going awry. These include approaching work with a single-mindedness that defrays other interests, an inflated sense of self-contribution, a false sense of security leading to self-deceptions of invulnerability and indispensability,



disregard of warning signals that troubles exist, and identifying with the organization as a surrogate family. Peak performers and organizational leaders alike can counteract these effects by legitimizing a well-rounded lifestyle with strong personal and professional networks, family stability, non-work interests, and robust mental health. Suggested behaviors include engaging in frequent, candid performance feedback and dialogue, and judicious use of staffing practices that attract, develop, and rotate peak performers through a variety of organizational roles.

Should the peak performer derail, organizational leaders are advised to provide the range of resources needed to navigate the shock of a sudden and traumatic separation at mid-life. These include a realistic preview of the impending termination, access to immediate therapeutic counseling for the peak performer and his/her family, financial and related professional advisory services, and the extended support of an appropriately qualified outplacement service provider.



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