

Midlife Transition in the Workplace: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT: The study explores the lived experiences of employees undergoing early midlife transition within workplace contexts. Using a phenomenological research design, in-depth interviews were conducted with employees aged 45–55 working in a semiconductor manufacturing company. Findings revealed themes related to professional identity consolidation, reflective wisdom, emotional resilience, shifting life priorities, and adaptation to workplace challenges. The results indicate that midlife transition is characterized not by crisis but by maturity, responsibility expansion, and adaptive coping strategies within professional and personal domains. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of midlife development within organizational environments.

KEYWORDS: Midlife transition, workplace development, phenomenology, professional identity, adult development

INTRODUCTION

Adulthood, particularly midlife, is often described as a way for people to endure multiple encounters within their own gains through work, family or even their own self, it is a turbulence within emotions that occurs as an aging person reassesses their identity and life choices mentioned by Sheldon Reid (2025). Existing research has examined aging and work performance largely through quantitative productivity measures, but fewer studies explore how midlife employees subjectively experience and interpret these internal changes in workplace contexts (Rudolph & Zacher, 2020). Understanding these lived experiences is important because workplace adaptation is not only cognitive but also emotional and identity-based.

Early midlife, typically spanning ages 45-55, often involves critical evaluation of identity, career trajectories, relationships, and life priorities (Levinson, 1996). While prior research has examined midlife through quantitative measures such as stress, job satisfaction, or health outcomes, there is a paucity of qualitative studies exploring the subjective, lived experiences of individuals navigating early midlife transitions. Understanding these experiences can provide insights into cognitive, emotional, and socioemotional processes, informing both theoretical frameworks and practical interventions. A phenomenological approach allows deeper exploration of how employees describe, interpret, and respond to these experiences. Bumpas and Aquino (2019) stated that midlife adults experience generally good health but with the percentage of adults who tend to have disability increase through midlife, early 40's had the chances of gaining disability and it is most likely to increase the highest among those with lower socioeconomic status. Aside from the Lifestyle being a stronger impact on health status, it is proven that cognitive abilities such as processing speed, working memory, and mental flexibility may begin to decline during midlife.

This study integrates Levinson's Life Structure Transition Theory and Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (Carstensen, 2021). Levinson's framework elucidates the structural stages of adult development, highlighting transitional periods such as early midlife when life evaluation occurs. Socioemotional Selectivity Theory complements this perspective by explaining the motivational processes driving prioritization of emotionally meaningful goals. Together, these theories offer both structural and motivational lenses to examine how adults experience early midlife transition. They are considered to be not only tenured but the masters of their field of expertise after dedicating their years in service. It is also a time to self reflect. Holly (2025) indicated that a midlife career crisis isn't just about work. It's about identity, purpose, and meaning. It's a wake-up call—not because something has gone wrong, but because you're being invited to grow again. It is shown that despite the challenges in the physical aspect, the ability to learn and improve skills isn't impossible.

This study aims to address this gap by examining how midlife employees perceive and navigate cognitive shifts while simultaneously developing emotional resilience, leadership maturity, and effective interpersonal strategies. Through a

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qualitative, phenomenological approach, the research seeks to capture the nuanced, multidirectional nature of adult development as it unfolds in real workplace settings. While workforce aging and adult development have been widely studied, there is limited phenomenological research focusing on how midlife employees experience both cognitive changes and emotional growth simultaneously within work environments.

Many workplace studies emphasize decline, performance metrics, or stress outcomes, but do not capture employees' first-person meaning-making and adaptive processes. With increasing cognitive demands, digital transitions, and emotional role complexity in modern organizations, it becomes necessary to understand how midlife employees experience and navigate these internal changes. This gap supports the need for a lived-experience investigation.

For this study, midlife employees are operationally defined as individuals aged 45-55 years old who are currently employed and have at least five years of continuous workplace experience.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Midlife as a Period of Consolidation and Opportunity

Midlife has traditionally been viewed as a period of crisis and instability; however, contemporary developmental research presents a different perspective. Recent studies describe midlife as a stage characterized by opportunity, stability, and consolidation of responsibilities rather than psychological disruption. Infurna and Lachman (2020) explain that midlife in the modern context represents an important developmental period in which individuals demonstrate accumulated competence, adaptive regulation, and strengthened commitments in both work and family life. Instead of experiencing abrupt change, many individuals in midlife reinforce their established roles and engage more intentionally in meaningful responsibilities.

This perspective reframes midlife transition as a period of reflection and reassessment. Individuals evaluate their life experiences and commitments and often deepen these roles rather than abandon them. As a result, midlife may reflect consolidation of identity and role stability rather than experimentation or crisis. This understanding provides an important context for examining how individuals interpret their experiences during early midlife.

Leadership Responsibility and Professional Identity Consolidation

Midlife often coincides with increased occupational responsibility and leadership roles. As individuals gain experience and expertise, their professional identity may shift from task-focused performance to broader responsibility within organizational systems. Contemporary lifespan research suggests that midlife adults frequently internalize organizational values and assume greater responsibility within structured work environments (Infurna et al., 2020).

Leadership in midlife therefore reflects the consolidation of professional identity. Rather than seeking entirely new career directions, individuals often reinforce their commitment to professional discipline and accountability. This shift represents the development of a more mature work orientation, where responsibility and long-term contribution become central aspects of professional identity.

Generativity and Contribution in Midlife

Generativity is also a key concept in understanding midlife development. Building on classical developmental perspectives, recent scholarship highlights that midlife adults often express generativity through mentorship, leadership, and contribution to organizational and social systems (Infurna et al., 2020). During this stage, individuals tend to focus less on personal advancement and more on guiding others and sustaining meaningful contributions within their environment.

In workplace settings, generativity may appear through mentoring younger colleagues, maintaining professional standards, and assuming responsibility beyond formal expectations. This orientation toward contribution reflects the strengthening of identity and commitment that often occurs during midlife development.

Work-Life Negotiation in the Midlife Context

While professional responsibilities often increase during midlife, individuals also manage evolving family and relational roles. Research on work-life balance indicates that midlife adults actively negotiate demands across personal and professional domains. Björk-Fant and Forsman (2021) found that work-life balance and psychosocial work environments vary according to life stage and family responsibilities. Their findings suggest that adjustments in work and family roles are often adaptive rather than conflict-driven.

These findings support the view that midlife transition involves recalibration rather than imbalance. Individuals may redistribute responsibilities within the family to accommodate work demands, creating negotiated arrangements rather than relational instability. Thus, strong work involvement during midlife does not necessarily indicate dysfunction but may reflect contextual prioritization and mutual understanding within the family system.

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Theoretical Integration

Levinson's Life Structure Transition Theory provides an important framework for understanding midlife development. Levinson proposed that adulthood is shaped by evolving life structures that include commitments to career, family, and personal identity. During midlife, individuals evaluate and often strengthen these structures, leading to greater stability and consolidation of roles (Levinson, 1996).

By integrating Levinson's theoretical perspective with contemporary research on midlife development, the present study examines how individuals interpret personal changes, workplace responsibilities, and coping strategies during early midlife transition. This framework helps explain how midlife employees reflect on their roles, adapt to challenges, and maintain commitments across both personal and professional contexts.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM/ RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Early midlife, typically occurring between ages **45 and 55**, is a pivotal developmental stage characterized by self-reflection, reassessment of life priorities, and restructuring of personal and professional domains Levinson (1996). Adults in this stage may experience cognitive, emotional, and socioemotional changes that influence their identity, relationships, and career trajectories. Identity involves the re-evaluation of personal values, self-perception, and life goals. Relationships may shift as individuals adjust priorities within family, friendships, and social networks. Similarly, career and work-life experiences may change as individuals navigate professional growth, role transitions, and job satisfaction.

Despite recognition of early midlife as a significant transitional stage, existing research is predominantly quantitative, focusing on stress, career performance, or health outcomes. Consequently, there remains limited understanding of the **subjective lived experiences** of adults undergoing midlife transition within workplace contexts.

This study therefore seeks to explore the lived experiences of adults undergoing early midlife transition by addressing the following research questions:

1. How do adults describe the personal changes they experience during early midlife?
2. How do adults interpret and assign meaning to these changes in identity, relationships, and work-life priorities?
3. What challenges emerge during early midlife, and how do individuals navigate these challenges?
4. What coping strategies or adjustments do adults employ to manage changes in priorities, life goals, and personal growth?

Primary Objective:

To explore and understand the lived experiences of adults aged 45-55 undergoing early midlife transition, focusing on cognitive, emotional, and socioemotional changes that influence identity, relationships, and career priorities.

Specific Objectives:

- To examine how participants describe the personal changes they experience during early midlife transition.
- To investigate how participants interpret and make meaning of these changes in relation to their identity, relationships, and work-life priorities.
- To identify challenges encountered during early midlife and how participants manage or adapt to these challenges.
- To explore the coping strategies or adjustments participants employ to address changes in priorities, life goals, and personal growth.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of adults aged 45-55 undergoing early midlife transition. Phenomenology is appropriate for this study as it focuses on understanding how individuals perceive, interpret, and make meaning of their personal experiences without imposing predetermined categories or measures. This approach allows for in-depth exploration of participants' subjective experiences in identity, relationships, and work-life priorities.

Participants

The study will purposely recruit five participants aged 45-55 years who self-identify as experiencing early midlife transition. Participants will be selected to ensure variation across personal and occupational backgrounds with a minimum of 5 continuous years of work experience preferably in the semiconductor company (e.g. Amkor Technology Philippines) providing a rich and diverse dataset while adhering to the phenomenological principle of depth over breadth.

The study will purposely select participants who are employees and have experienced significant personal, relational, or professional transitions during early midlife. These participants must be willing to engage in in-depth interviews to provide rich, firsthand accounts of their lived experiences, challenges, and adaptations during this stage of life.

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Data Gathering Methods

The method to collect the data is suggested to use semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which are appropriate for a phenomenological design focused on exploring the lived experiences of midlife adults. Participants will be given a minimum of 30-45 mins length of interview and will be conducted either face-to-face or through a secure online platform depending on participant preference and availability.

Before the interview begins, participants will be asked to sign an informed consent form and complete a short demographic questionnaire containing basic information such as age, occupation, years of work experience, and perceived cognitive changes. The interview guide will include open-ended questions centered on participants to share personal stories, emotions, and reflections. Interviews will be audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. To ensure confidentiality, participants' identities will be protected using pseudonyms, and all data will be securely stored.

The information gathered from these interviews will then be analyzed to identify themes and patterns that reflect the essence of participants' emotional growth, providing a rich understanding of midlife work experiences.

The researcher will ask permission to make the interview audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of the data collected through transcription and securely stored under pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Data collection will continue until information-rich narratives are obtained from 5 participants, consistent with qualitative phenomenological research standards.

Additionally, notes will also be taken suggestively during the interviews to document nonverbal cues, researcher reflections, and contextual details that may support data analysis and interpretation.

Data Analysis

The interview responses were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method, where participant statements were organized into themes to answer each research question.

Transcripts will be read repeatedly to ensure familiarization with the data, while initial notes and analytic memos will be written to capture clear impressions.

The analysis will follow these steps:

1. **Familiarization** – The researcher read and re-read the transcripts to gain a deep understanding of participants' experiences.
2. **Extracting Significant Statements** – Relevant statements related to the participants' experiences of midlife transition were identified.
3. **Formulating Meanings** – Meanings were derived from these significant statements.
4. **Clustering Themes** – Formulated meanings were grouped into themes that reflect common patterns across participants.
5. **Developing an Exhaustive Description** – A comprehensive description of the lived experiences was constructed.
6. **Member Checking** – The findings were returned to participants to validate the accuracy of the interpretations. worklife, highlighting shared experiences, insights, and variations among participants.

Throughout the process, the researcher will ensure credibility and trustworthiness by cross-checking interpretations, maintaining an audit trail, and reflecting on potential biases. This approach will allow the study to present a rich, nuanced understanding of emotional development during midlife work experiences.

In conclusion, the results will be written as a narrative description supported by participant quotes, using pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Ethical Considerations and Rigor Safeguards

This study will adhere to established ethical standards for qualitative and phenomenological research to protect participant welfare and ensure the credibility of findings. Participation will be fully voluntary, and informed consent will be obtained prior to data collection. Participants will be informed about the purpose of the study, interview procedures, recording methods, confidentiality protections, and their right to decline any question or withdraw at any time without consequence. All identifying information will be removed from transcripts, and pseudonyms will be used in reporting to ensure anonymity. Data will be stored securely and accessible only to the researcher.

Because the interviews involve reflection on personal emotional experiences in the workplace, some questions may evoke discomfort or emotional responses. Participants will be informed of this possibility in advance. If a participant shows signs of distress during the interview, the researcher will pause the session and check in with the participant.

The interview may be stopped, rescheduled, or continued only with the participant's explicit consent. Participants will be reminded that they control the pacing and depth of disclosure. If needed, the researcher will provide information about appropriate support resources.

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To ensure methodological rigor, the researcher will practice bracketing, intentionally setting aside personal assumptions and preconceptions before and throughout data collection and analysis. In addition, member checking will be conducted by returning summarized interpretations or thematic descriptions to participants to verify accuracy and alignment with their intended meanings. These procedures support both ethical responsibility and phenomenological credibility.

Transcription of Data

All interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's consent to ensure accuracy and completeness of data.

The recordings are being transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of the participant's lived experiences, including pauses, emphasis, and emotional expressions where relevant.

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for analysis. Significant statements from the transcripts were identified and grouped into thematic categories to capture the essence of the participants' experiences during midlife transition in the workplace.

RESULTS

The interview responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, where participant statements were coded and grouped into subthemes and major themes to answer each research question.

Research Question 1

To examine how participants describe the personal changes they experience during early midlife transition.

Theme 1: Midlife as a Period of Consolidation and Opportunity

Participants described early midlife as a period of reflection, increased awareness, and personal growth. They became more conscious of their physical condition, emotions, and life decisions. Rather than viewing midlife as a crisis, participants saw it as a stage of maturity and stability.

"The more you get older, the wiser you become... life begins at forty." (Participant 2)

This finding supports the view that midlife is characterized by stability, accumulated experience, and strengthened commitments rather than crisis (Infurna & Lachman, 2020).

Research Question 2

How do adults interpret and assign meaning to the changes they experience in identity, relationships, and work-life priorities during early midlife?

Theme 1: Leadership Responsibility and Professional Identity Consolidation

"Basta mahal mo yung trabaho mo... you enjoy what you're doing." (Participant 1)

Participants viewed their work as more meaningful and responsibility-driven during midlife. Work was no longer seen only as a source of income but as a reflection of commitment and long-term contribution. This reflects the consolidation of professional identity, where individuals develop stronger commitment and responsibility in their roles (Infurna et al., 2020).

Theme 2: Generativity and Contribution in Midlife

Participants reported becoming more understanding and empathetic toward others. They recognized the importance of supporting coworkers and contributing to the workplace.

This reflects generativity, where individuals focus on guiding others and contributing beyond themselves (Infurna et al., 2020).

"Hindi ko sila kinakausap... binobulyawan, sinisigawan... later on, I learned about the situation." (Participant 2)

This suggests increased awareness and empathy in dealing with others. Participants also expressed a desire to guide others based on their own experiences:

"Kaya I need to share kung ano yung mga hindi karapat dapat para hindi ko mabalikan at maituro ko rin sa iba." (Participant 2)

These findings reflect generativity, where individuals focus on guiding others and contributing beyond themselves (Infurna et al., 2020).

Research Question 3

What challenges emerge during early midlife, and how do individuals navigate these challenges?

Theme 1: Work-Life Negotiation in the Midlife Context

Participants experienced challenges related to increased workload and balancing work with personal life. Work responsibilities often extended beyond regular hours.

"Ang dami mong paperwork... kahit pagod ka na, gagawin mo pa rin." (Participant 1)

This reflects the need to balance work and personal responsibilities, which is common during midlife (Björk-Fant & Forsman, 2021).

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Theme 2: Emotional and Psychological Adjustment

Participants also experienced self-doubt, reduced confidence, and concerns about workplace competition, especially with younger employees.

"I'm starting to feel I'm not that needed anymore in my current job role. Many young people are more competitive; their salaries are almost near to mine even though I am more tenured than them" (Participant 5)

These challenges reflect the need for adjustment as individuals reassess their roles and adapt to changing environments (Infurna & Lachman, 2020) which suggests that midlife transitions often involve confronting new personal and professional challenges as individuals reassess their life roles and responsibilities while adapting to evolving workplace environments.

Research Question 4

What coping strategies or adjustments do adults employ during early midlife?

Theme 1: Adaptive Coping and Role Stabilization

Participants coped with midlife challenges through reflection, emotional regulation, and maintaining a positive mindset.

"As we age, we have to grow in wisdom." (Participant 1)

This shows that midlife involves developing resilience and adapting to changes (Levinson, 1996). These strategies included personal reflection, strengthening family relationships, emotional resilience, and continuous learning.

Theme 2: Strengthening Relationships and Continuous Learning

Participants also coped by strengthening family relationships and continuously learning new skills to adapt to workplace changes. These strategies support stability and adjustment in both personal and professional life (Björk-Fant & Forsman, 2021).

DISCUSSION

Grounded in Levinson's Life Structure Transition Theory, the findings of this study indicate that early midlife is characterized by reflection, consolidation of roles, and adaptive growth rather than crisis. Participants described this stage as a period of increased awareness, responsibility, and maturity within both personal and professional contexts.

The findings suggest that midlife serves as a period of consolidation and opportunity, where individuals strengthen their existing roles and commitments. Participants demonstrated a deeper understanding of their life experiences, which contributed to greater emotional awareness and more intentional decision-making. This supports contemporary research that describes midlife as a stage of stability and accumulated competence rather than instability (Infurna & Lachman, 2020).

In terms of professional identity, participants showed a shift from task-oriented work toward responsibility-driven roles. Work became more meaningful, reflecting not only financial necessity but also personal fulfillment and long-term contribution. This aligns with the concept of professional identity consolidation, where individuals internalize organizational values and assume greater responsibility in their roles (Infurna et al., 2020). The findings also reflect generativity, as participants expressed a growing intention to guide others and contribute to the workplace beyond their individual roles.

Despite these positive developments, participants also encountered challenges related to increased workload, emotional pressure, and concerns about workplace competitiveness. These challenges highlight the demands placed on midlife individuals as they balance professional responsibilities with personal roles. However, rather than leading to dysfunction, these experiences required adjustment and role negotiation. This supports research indicating that midlife involves active management of work and personal demands through adaptive strategies (Björk-Fant & Forsman, 2021).

Importantly, participants demonstrated the ability to cope with these challenges through reflection, emotional regulation, and strengthening relationships. They emphasized maintaining a positive mindset, learning from experience, and sustaining supportive connections with family and colleagues. These coping strategies reflect adaptive development and resilience, consistent with Levinson's view that midlife involves the strengthening of life structures and integration of experiences into a more stable identity.

Overall, the findings suggest that early midlife is not a period of crisis but a stage of growth, stability, and adaptation. Participants' experiences highlight the importance of meaning-making, role consolidation, and resilience in navigating midlife transition within the workplace. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of adult development by emphasizing both the challenges and strengths present during this stage of life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to support employees undergoing midlife transition within organizational contexts.

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Organizational Recognition and Long-Service Appreciation Programs

The study revealed that many midlife employees demonstrate strong professional commitment and identity consolidation after several years of service. Organizations may consider implementing structured long-service recognition programs for employees who have rendered significant years of service. Appreciation events, service milestone awards, or leadership recognition initiatives may reinforce employees' sense of contribution, belonging, and professional identity.

Continuous Learning and Skills Development Opportunities

Several participants emphasized the importance of continuous learning and adapting to evolving workplace demands. Organizations may therefore provide professional development opportunities such as training programs, mentorship initiatives, and leadership development workshops to help midlife employees maintain confidence and remain competitive within dynamic work environments.

Health and Wellness Programs for Midlife Employees

The findings also indicated increased awareness of health and emotional well-being during midlife. Organizations may introduce wellness-centered initiatives such as health awareness seminars, regular wellness screenings, mental health support services, and fitness activities to support employees' long-term productivity and well-being.

Work-Life Integration and Family-Oriented Support

Participants reported shifting priorities toward family relationships and personal well-being. Organizations may consider implementing flexible work arrangements, family-supportive policies, and leadership coaching programs that promote work-life integration, enabling employees to maintain stability in both personal and professional roles.

Fostering Intergenerational Collaboration in the Workplace

The study also highlighted experiences related to generational differences within the workplace. Organizations may encourage mentorship programs and collaborative work environments where experienced employees and younger colleagues can exchange knowledge and perspectives, strengthening organizational cohesion and mutual learning.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research may expand the participant pool to capture a wider range of midlife experiences across different organizational settings and industries. Comparative studies may also examine how midlife transitions vary across occupational roles, leadership levels, or cultural contexts. Additionally, longitudinal research may explore how midlife experiences influence long-term career development, well-being, and family relationships.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study provides a deeper understanding of how midlife adults experience emotional growth and development in the workplace. While research often emphasizes challenges associated with midlife, less attention is given to the strengths that adults gain during this stage, such as emotional maturity, resilience, and enhanced interpersonal and leadership skills. Exploring these experiences highlights that midlife development is not solely a period of challenge but also a time of personal and professional growth.

- For employees, the study may help midlife workers better understand their own emotional experiences and recognize the strengths they bring to their roles.
- For employers and organizations, the findings offer guidance for creating supportive workplace practices, including job design, training programs, and resources that acknowledge and leverage the emotional strengths of midlife employees.
- For psychologists, counselors, and HR practitioners, the study contributes insights that can improve interventions, coaching, and mental health support tailored to midlife adults.
- For future researchers, this study expands local literature on adult development by showing how emotional growth manifests in real workplace contexts.

Lastly, the study emphasizes how midlife employees navigate workplace challenges while developing emotional and leadership strengths, providing guidance for employees, organizations, and practitioners to support well-being and effective adaptation in the workplace.

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