

Why More Companies
Should Offer
Employee Sabbaticals
Phyllis Korkki

The Midlife Gap Year



It's time to make a midcareer gap year an accepted part of people's working lives.

The academic world has long recognized the importance of sabbaticals as a way to press the refresh button on one's life and work. Some companies (including Deloitte, Genentech, General Mills and Kimpton and PriceWaterhouseCoopers) offer sabbaticals to their employees, but these tend to last a few weeks to a few months—not enough time for a complete break from the daily grind.

Rather than call a break from a nonacademic job a sabbatical, I think we need to call it a gap year, so that it is modeled after the year that some students take off between high school and college. For these young people just starting out in life, taking a gap year is a time to explore new interests and develop a sense of independence. For middle-aged people, it can be a similar journey, but with more of the richness of the past to inform it.

A midcareer gap year is an important step to incorporate into people's professional and personal lives because of two major societal changes: extended longevity and a transformed work world.

By now many of us have accepted that the traditional career arc of past generations—working for one company for most of your life and then retiring—is no longer the norm. The model that has come to replace that for many—working for a series of companies for shorter periods—is a wonderful deal for companies in the short term. At a time when technology is changing at a dizzying pace, they can hire employees with the most up-to-date skills. As a bonus, these employees are usually right out of college and therefore cheaper than older workers.

This model can also be beneficial for workers who like change and flexibility—who can leverage their skills so as to appeal to their employer of choice or the highest bidder. We have seen the rise of the “gig economy,” where people can work as independent contractors and choose when and where they want to work. But too often, this setup benefits the employer more than the worker, who can end up beset by worries over finances and health insurance. And, over all, this model favors younger workers over older ones.

What a company gives up with this new model of job hopping is institutional memory and institutional loyalty. What the employee gives up is a sense of belonging and security. A gap year could help return some of these valued commodities to the corporate world—and give people a chance to achieve something meaningful beyond their professional lives. It could even allow people to leave a legacy that would benefit society as a whole.

In my book, *The Big Thing*, I talk about a yearning that many people have to complete a big creative project. It could be a work of art—a novel, a play, a symphony, a sculpture, or it could be a new product, service, or technological innovation. It could even be an experience, like an expedition or a spiritual pilgrimage. “A Big Thing” as I define it can take many forms, but it is always personally meaningful, has a complex structure, and it takes long-term concentration and effort to complete.

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Big Things are not forced on you by the outside world, the way your employer forces you to get your work done so you can get your paycheck. They tend not to have an external deadline, and that is why they are so damnably hard to finish. Many people use their jobs as an excuse for not finishing their Big Things. If only they didn't have to work 40, 50, 60 hours a week, they could write that book, film that documentary, or create that app.

For some people, that line of reasoning is really just an excuse. Throughout history, people have held down full-time jobs and written books (Anthony Trollope and Toni Morrison are just two of many examples), composed symphonies (Charles Ives), and come up with the Theory of Relativity (Albert Einstein).

But some people really could benefit from a full year off to immerse themselves in the creation of their Big Thing. (And if the goal is an experience such as traveling around the world, then time off is a necessity.) This is where a midcareer gap year, built into our working lives as an accepted occurrence, would be a boon.

I emphasize midcareer gap years because it is much easier to take time off for these types of pursuits when we are younger or older. It is in the middle of our lives that our financial obligations and professional ambitions tend to be at their peak—and when taking a long break poses the greatest risk.

We've seen the career damage that can occur when workers (mainly women) take time off to raise children or care for ailing relatives. (In a way, these activities are a type of Big Thing as well.)

That's why I propose that it become accepted practice for workers to be allowed one gap year at some point in their careers. It would be unpaid, but they would be allowed to return to their company if they choose, perhaps not in the same position they held before, but a similar one.

The "if they choose" clause is an important one, because it is inevitable that some people would not return from their gap year. Perhaps their Big Thing will have turned into a moneymaking enterprise. Or the year off will have resulted in a new job offer from a different company, or a period of soul searching and a new life direction entirely.

I can hear some executives snorting at this idea and saying, "If they don't have to come back, then what's in it for us?" What's in it for them is that some people *will* come back, and they will come back grateful and refreshed.

As our society has come to accept the idea that job hopping is de rigueur, we have lost sight of the fact that institutional knowledge and loyalty are valuable commodities. That was a part of working life that the old model got right. Hopefully, the gap year will have given the returning worker new perspectives, along with crucial knowledge to impart to newer workers.

But as an accepted practice, a gap year with an option to return should be allowed only once in a person's career, as it is a sacrifice on the employer's part to allow it. And, making a gap year a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity will cause workers to be thoughtful about when to take that time, and to consider carefully how to use it.

People could perhaps save for their gap years in the same way they now save for their children's educations and their retirements. Gap year accounts that workers began in their teens or 20s could be withdrawn when they reached their 40s and 50s. Or, perhaps the one penalty-free exception for removing money from your 401(k) or IRA before retirement could be to finance your gap year. Because people are working later in life than ever before, they would have plenty of opportunity to make up for the deficit on the back end.

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Given our longer life expectancies, it simply isn't fair to expect people to work year in and year out until they retire. People need a break at some point to take stock of their lives, to reflect, to exercise that part of themselves that has lain dormant because of external demands. Too often, if people do get a break like that, it is unexpected (a layoff, for example) and comes with so much financial anxiety that it is very hard to accomplish anything of substance.

As I researched my book on completing big creative projects, I realized that there are times when one's chronological age aligns with one's creative purpose. As David W. Galenson pointed out in his book *Old Masters and Young Geniuses: The Two Life Cycles of Creativity*, certain types of endeavors lend themselves to the brash innovation of youth that has been untrammelled by past precedent; other projects benefit from a slow building of life experience and wisdom.

Most of us will not be able to work on Big Things continually all our lives. Therefore it is important for us to know when the time has come in our life cycle to pursue them. What a waste—for ourselves and perhaps for society—if our time to create something lasting and meaningful passes us by because our day jobs are too demanding.

A recent article in *American Banker* highlights how shortsighted it is for employers to let go of their highly skilled midcareer employees just because they need—and deserve—a break.

Barclays is now offering “a paid internship program for midcareer bankers who have left the industry but want to come back,” the article reports. “The idea is to give once high-performing employees an opportunity to brush up on their skills and re-establish their networks.”

“People used to say, ‘Once you leave, it’s hard to get back in,’” a Barclays vice chairman is quoted as saying. “Well, why? Why should we not want that talent?”

Barclays is to be applauded for its internship program. Some of these returning bankers will not have worked at Barclays, of course, and they will need to learn the company’s structure and culture from scratch. But how much better would it be if companies routinely left a spot open for their an employee who felt the call to take time off for an extended period? Employees could check in, say quarterly, for the latest news, and after a short period of training after their year off they could hit the ground running when they returned.

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Karan Bajaj was an executive at Kraft Foods who several years ago convinced his boss (who was at first “bewildered” at the idea) to allow him to take a yearlong sabbatical to travel, meditate and write a novel. As Bajaj wrote (in a piece I edited for the Sunday Business section of *The New York Times*), “I was surprised by how discomfoting it was to be a beginner again. For six months, I wasn’t a director at a big company in New York. I was just someone who’d barely done any yoga and meditation before and was reprimanded by gurus for being inflexible and restless.”

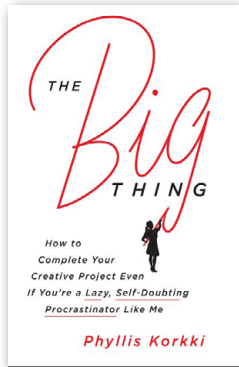
The chance to be a beginner again is very important in midlife. Neuroscientists have found that the brain becomes less “plastic” after we are in our 20s, making learning much harder. But the brain is a muscle that strengthens with use. Studies have shown that if older people exercise their brains by continually learning new things, then their ability in that area greatly improves. People who take sabbaticals to learn or do something new can potentially return to their employer with their brains in top shape to learn the latest new technology or system—while possessing the wisdom to know how best to apply it, and even whether to apply it at all (deciding not to do something is an important business skill that often requires wisdom).

“Since my return, I’ve become much less rigid than before,” Bajaj wrote. “Perhaps as a result of losing control for much of the year, I find myself more comfortable with trying out ideas on bursts of inspiration and spontaneity, mine or others’, versus linear, return-on-investment-driven models.”

In their book *The 100-Year Life*, Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott talk about the importance of restructuring our lives in a time when people will live into their 90s and beyond, and age more healthily than ever before. More people will work into their 80s, they say, and the idea of a three-stage life, consisting of education, employment, and retirement, will disappear. They predict “a multi-stage life with new milestones and turning points.”

A midcareer gap year fits perfectly into this new way of living. **I hope that one day it becomes so commonplace that colleagues will routinely ask one another: “So when do you plan to take your gap year?”** 📌

Info



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