

Research Findings - Personality Type and the Male Experience of Career in Midlife

Dr Rob Brandenburg, recipient of an AACCC Research Scholarship in 2006, conducted research leading to the award of a Doctorate in Counselling that aimed to explore selected aspects of personality and their effects on midlife careers, specifically targeting men with intuitive-feeling preferences compared to men with sensing-thinking preferences. The complete text of this article, including tables and references, is available by contacting Dr Rob Brandenburg at <http://www.brandenburgconsulting.org>.

Methodology

Based on Jungian (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator®) personality preferences, ten Intuitive-Feeling (NF) and ten Sensing-Thinking (ST) males (40-55 years) were recruited from a pool of people who had previously undergone a structured MBTI assessment with an accredited practitioner and had self-selected their best fit preferences.

Participants were asked to rank ten key possible motivators/incentives that were identified from a review of the literature and developed into a Career Priorities Index: income and/or other financial benefits; status/ acknowledgement of others; work flexibility/autonomy; professional development/ training; opportunities for promotion/career advancement; relationships at work (with boss/associates/customers); work/life balance; new work challenges/tasks; coaching/mentoring/developing of others; receiving coaching & mentoring from a person you admire/respect.

After completing the MBTI, demographic information and the Career Priorities Index, participants underwent a 30 to 45 minute interview on career and work in midlife. Specifically, they were asked to comment on change (positive or negative) in their careers since entering midlife; career dreams and aspirations they had as young men and to what extent they had eventuated; new career dreams or aspirations; and job loss/unemployment. Finally, participants were asked to comment on those items they felt were most and least important to them on the Career Priorities Index. The two groups were broadly similar in terms of age, partnership status and years in previous/current employment. By contrast, income was generally higher for STs while NFs had higher levels of education and were more likely to be self employed.

The current occupations of the participants generally conformed with expectations for NF and ST preferences. Sixty per cent of the NF group versus none of the ST group identified their occupation/profession as teaching, human resources or consulting. By contrast, 90% of the ST group and 30% of the NF group indicated their occupation/profession as business, management or sales.

Results

The majority of participants in both groups reported a positive attitude or motivation towards their career in midlife and attributed this to family/community engagement; career mastery and alignment of personal/organisational values. Males with NF,

compared to ST preferences, were more likely to have perceived they had fulfilled previous career dreams, aspired to work roles which had greater self-determination/autonomy and desired opportunities to coach/mentor others. However, they were less likely to seek a change of occupation and reacted with greater disillusionment/cynicism to job loss. These areas are elaborated in the sections below.

Attitude or motivation towards career since entering midlife

The majority (17/20) of participants (9NF, 8ST) reported a positive attitude/motivation towards their career at midlife and three (1NF, 2ST) described their career attitude/motivation in negative terms.

Analysis of the interview transcripts of the 17 participants reporting a positive attitudes/motivation toward career revealed three underlying themes: Family/Community Engagement, Career Mastery and Alignment of Personal/Organisational Values.

Seven (3NF, 4ST) participants indicated that a reorientation towards family life and community activities underlay their positive attitude/motivation towards career in midlife. One ST participant described the importance of work/life balance in midlife:

My priorities...turned around... I started cutting back my hours that I used to work [and began to focus] more on my kids. I only get one chance with my kids while they are growing up...My aspirations to be a high flying executive have probably changed completely [although I am] still a hard worker and still motivated and loyal.

Seven (5NF, 2ST) participants identified career mastery as a key element of their positive attitude/motivation in midlife. The two personality types, however, differed with regards to how this was expressed. NFs were more internally referenced and emphasised elements of authenticity and alignment with true self. NFs typically spoke of finding their “ideal” career that they “really love” and found “very fulfilling” while also making “a profound impact...on society”. An illustrative comment was:

I can admire my own capacities, my own talents...I'm a bit more sage in that regard. I think I appreciate myself a lot better in terms of my career. (NF)

One exception was the NF who reported becoming more “ambitious” in midlife in order to provide “a better lifestyle” for both for his family and himself.

By contrast, STs expressed career mastery more in terms of external events. One reported his manager was the catalyst for alerting him to the need to become more proactive and undertake further study in order to reactivate a career that was “floundering” due to a lack of motivation. The other ST reported marital separation had led him to re-evaluate his life and accept that he “needed to be happy”. This acted as the catalyst for change and as a result experienced greater “satisfaction and happiness” with his career (and his personal relationships).

Four (3NF, 1ST) participants indicated an alignment of personal and organisational values had been integral in their positive attitude/motivation toward career in midlife and that they had consciously chosen to work in environments that nurtured what they

believed was their true self. Of note is that experiencing/observing job loss was the catalyst for all four to re-examine their career priorities. A typical comment was:

I started seeing the dishonesty of large companies in regards to their loyalty to customers and their...employees. (NF)

In summary, the majority were positive regarding work/career. NFs emphasised alignment of personal/organisational values, career mastery and family/community engagement. By contrast, STs stressed family/community engagement, career mastery and to a lesser extent alignment of personal/organisational values.

No clear themes related to negative attitude/motivation toward career emerged. A small number (3/20) reported a negative attitude/motivation toward their careers, primarily because of their previous experience of job loss/unemployment.

Career dreams and aspirations as young men

A majority (7 NF, 8 ST) of participants had concrete career dreams as young men before entering the workforce. Interestingly, career dreams were more likely to eventuate for NFs (6/7) compared to STs (2/8) but ironically a relatively small proportion of these NFs (2/6) compared with STs (2/2) reported it to be a positive experience.

Concerning initial career dreams, NFs tended to project human services (HS) related careers whereas STs equally favoured business and sales (BS) and human services (HS). For the NF subgroup who had a career dream as young men, a majority (6/8) reported that their career dreams eventuated. By contrast, only a small number (2/6) of STs reported that their career dreams eventuated.

A key factor for NFs who reported achieving their dream but did not find it a positive experience was the lack of congruence between personal and organisational values. A typical NF comment was:

I started seeing the dishonesty of large companies in regards to their loyalty towards customers and their loyalty towards their employees. So therefore I made a [major career] change then [so I could] put something back into society ...for the betterment of others.

One NF similarly described how “it wasn’t satisfying at all” achieving his goal of becoming a middle manager in his early forties, mainly due to the “dishonesty”, “games” and “politics” he encountered. Another NF described his experience of trying to work in a “macho” environment where he was “trying to force myself into a mould that didn’t fit me... the classic square peg in a round hole scenario”. He went on to describe how he felt “rejected” because he was unable to “conform” to the main group culture.

A modest number of participants (3NF, 2ST) reported not having a career dream and typically described work as something you simply did after leaving school. It is of interest that the lack of a specific career dream did not necessarily result in dissatisfaction: “My career evolved and found itself...which has been very enjoyable”.

Midlife career dreams

The majority (9ST, 9NF) of the participants also reported a midlife career dream. For NFs it was exclusively in human services related fields such as counselling, coaching, mentoring, consulting, training and pastoral care, indicating a shift from their career dream as a young man (when 4/9 were human services). For STs, a majority (6/9) of midlife career dreams focused on human services, indicating a shift in the balance from young adult career dreams that were predominantly business and sales related. Of note was that no participants from either group reported a dream that involved changing from human services to business/sales whereas a small number of NFs (2/9) and a modest number of STs (4/9) reported a shift from business/sales into human services.

The present study did not probe for explanations behind the career dream but the comments in general indicated a desire to gain greater self-determination and autonomy regarding career choices. This was particularly evident amongst NFs. A majority of NFs (7/9) with a dream reported self-determination/autonomy as a major career motivator in midlife. A typical NF comments (from a self employed human resources consultant) was:

[There will be] plenty of work, plenty of challenge and with that comes choice and satisfaction...[My] career dream is to keep out of [workplace] politics, to keep doing good work and be financially and psychologically rewarded for that.

Inherent in the NF desire for self-determination/autonomy was the need to pursue a career/work environment that aligned with their personal values. One example was the NF who stressed the need to “get out of finance” and complete/publish a novel he had begun writing. Similarly, another NF wanted to leave teaching in order to fulfil his lifetime dream of becoming a professional artist. A third NF also spoke of his plans to leave his current employer where he felt “stifled” by inflexibility and bureaucracy and work in an environment “where things would happen very quickly”. In contrast, only two STs reported the need for greater self-determination/autonomy. One ST dreamed of becoming an evangelist/clergyman, thereby aligning personal values with career choice and the other of establishing his own business so as to reduce the “ridiculous hours” he was working and gain “a bit more freedom”.

A minority (1NF, 2ST) of participants indicated a desire to undertake tertiary study in a different career field, two of them (1NF, 1ST) in counselling/psychology and one (ST) in teaching.

The two personality groups expressed “generativity” (Erikson 1968) or the desire to pass on what they had learned in a similar way. For example, one NF spoke of his dream of helping younger men with their inner journey” of self- development and an ST commented on his strong desire to “mentor boys”.

The experience of job loss/unemployment

Many will experience enforced job loss/unemployment at some stage of their career. The impact job loss has on careers in midlife and, more specifically, whether there are differences between the two personality subtypes was investigated.

A moderate number (7NF, 4ST) of participants had experienced job loss/unemployment at some stage of their adult career with the incidence higher among NFs relative to STs. All reported instances of job loss related to employment in the private sector.

NFs who experienced job loss reported the two broad themes of disillusionment/cynicism and reluctance, compared to STs, to contextualise the retrenchment rather personalise it.

Firstly, the NFs commented on their disillusionment and cynicism with the world of work in general and, more specifically, with business/organisational values. One spoke of the resulting “disillusionment with corporate values” and another of the shock of losing his job despite “doing the right thing” leading him to become more cynical regarding the motives of organisations. Job loss/unemployment, however, was instrumental in allowing NFs to become “more authentic” in regard to their career aspirations.

Secondly, only one NF to experience job loss chose to discuss it in relation to a broader context. He commented that job loss had made him stronger and had not negatively impacted on his self-esteem. In comparison, STs described their experience of job loss more objectively and with less apparent emotion. The ST preference for not experiencing and showing emotion was evident in the following statement about job loss in midlife:

At the time I probably was ... just getting on with it, not showing what I was feeling inwardly...Externally [I was] pretty resilient. In terms of midlife, I've [since] allowed myself to become more and more emotional on certain issues.

Major career priorities

The responses given to ten items listed on the Career Priorities Index, designed to explore current/midlife values and thinking, were ranked for both the NF and ST subgroups. The results and are summarised in the following Career Priorities Index table where items ranked 1 [most important] to 10 [least important] by personality type) are depicted.

	NF		ST	
	Median Rank		Median Rank	
Work/life balance	2.5	1	Work/life balance	1.0 1
Coach/mentor others	3.5	2	Work flexibility	3.0 2
Work flexibility	4.0	3	New challenges	3.5 3
Income/benefits	4.0	3	Income/benefits	4.0 4
Relationships at work	4.0	3	Relationships at work	5.0 5
New challenges	4.5	6	Status/acknowledge	6.0 6
Training/development	6.5	7	Coach/mentor others	7.0 7
Status/acknowledge	8.0	8	Training/development	8.0 8
Promotion	8.0	8	Receive coaching	8.5 9
Receive coaching	8.5	10	Promotion	9.0 10

After completing the Career Priorities Index interviewees were asked to comment on the items/themes that were currently most and least important to them regarding work and career. For both NFs and STs, work/life balance and work flexibility ranked in the top three. Promotion and receiving coaching ranked in the lowest three items for both subgroups. Indicative of the importance attached to work/life balance was the comment:

There was a period where work was everything. I've learnt...to withdraw a little bit and create life outside of work for myself. I've done that and I feel I've got the... right balance. (ST)

An illustrative comment on promotion was:

I am not looking for an opportunity [for promotion]... if they come along I will quite readily assess them and filter them for what they are and [for] what I want to do. (ST)

The two groups, however, did differ in the ranking of coaching/mentoring others and to a lesser extent new challenges. Coaching/mentoring others ranked 2nd for NFs as against 7th for the ST group. A typical NF comment was:

Coaching, mentoring and developing others [is] a passion that I've always had... I enjoy doing that and I enjoy seeing the fruit of that also. It's a good thing in my life.

New challenges was ranked 3rd by the ST group compared to 6th by NFs. There was an apparent difference in how the notion of new challenges was perceived by the two groups. NFs typically reported getting bored easily and then wanting "to move on" into a new role or job. STs who reported new challenges as being important did not typically indicate the need to change roles or jobs to achieve this and inferred a desire for new challenges within their current work/job role. The view that NFs have a greater propensity to move on in search of new challenges is supported by demographic data that indicates, on average, STs were employed in their current/most recent job on average about 66% longer than the NFs.

Midlife and the underdeveloped mental functions

It would be expected according to MBTI developmental theory that the underdeveloped mental functions of the two groups (ST for the NFs and NF for the STs) would evidence change in midlife. Interview analysis of responses identified that 17/20 (85%) of participants (9NF, 8ST) had comments reflecting developmental change. NFs were generally becoming more realistic/pragmatic (S) and analytical/objective (T) regarding career options in midlife. One typical NF comment referred to how he had learnt to "critically "re-evaluate" his strengths" by conducting a "self-inventory". STs typically reported becoming more adept at visioning future career options/possibilities (N) and focusing more on relationships and acknowledging their personal needs and values (F). Three STs commented on a new desire to "mentor" and "counsel" others.

Discussion

This study supports Levinson's contention (1978) that men in midlife re-evaluate their personal goals and develop a new vision or Dream about the future. There is also support for the view that career satisfaction and work/life balance become

increasingly important (Levinson 1986; O'Connor 1995; Super 1971). Work/life balance ranked first out of ten career related items for both the NF and ST subgroups. Both groups were similar regarding what made a positive work experience and, while using slightly different language, there was evidence of generativity (Erikson 1968) for both personality types. This suggests there are commonalities among midlife men that transcend personality type.

The findings indicate NF and ST subgroups differed in five main aspects. In brief, (1) eventuation of young adult career dreams; (2) the nature of midlife career dreams; (3) future career aspirations (4) job loss response; and (5) the relative importance attached to coaching/mentoring others and new challenges in the workplace (as identified by the Career Priorities Index).

Eventuation of young adult career dreams

A higher number of NFs than STs reported that their career dream eventuated. This supports the notion (Myers et al 1998) that NFs, compared to STs, are more able to vision their future (because of their well developed N preference). Of note, however, is that a minority of the NFs reported that achieving their young adult career dream was a positive experience. This may be possibly attributed to the NF preference for developing ideas and visioning the future (their N function) and then subjectively making decisions to act on that vision or dream (their F function). However, the NF compared to the ST may be prone to poor decision making regarding career choices because they may not have gathered relevant, practical information about their chosen career due to their relatively underdeveloped S function or they went into careers significant others had devised for them. The NF may also make decisions regarding their career without logically considering the implications of what those careers would actually be like in practice (due to their possibly underdeveloped T function).

The reason these dreams didn't eventuate were not directly explored therefore it is not possible to explain the difference as to the number of eventuations between the two groups. However, interview data did supply sufficient information to explain what made for a positive experience of fulfilling career dreams: congruence of personal values with those of the organisation/profession in which they worked. For NFs the congruence came through long term careers in teaching and human resources consulting while for the two STs the congruence came through long term careers with two major trans-national companies.

In the present study, contrary to general stereotypical assumptions, midlife work attitudes and motivation levels were positive. To be an employer of choice, organisations need to provide a working environment conducive to active community engagement (in terms of work/life balance), opportunities for attaining career mastery (through ongoing skills/professional development) and organisational values that align with those of employees.

The nature of midlife career dreams

In comparison to STs, NFs emphasised the importance of self-determination and autonomy in their career and a strong desire to work in environments that aligned with their personal values. This is consistent with MBTI theory regarding mental functions and career choice (Myers et al 1998, 293-295). The results indicate that the ST group are looking for careers that are more people/relationship focused. This is consistent

with a desire to develop their previously potentially less developed NF mental functions. For NFs, however, there was no similar desire to pursue careers that would require greater emphasis of their underdeveloped ST mental functions. Overall, the midlife career dreams are in vocational areas that allow generativity and service. There was clear support for Pederson's contention (1993) that the way males experience life varies with personality type, especially when comparing NF with ST males.

It was observed that the ability of young adults to vision a future career path varied according to personality type. Some types (such as ST) may need greater assistance in identifying long term career goals while NFs may need help in identifying the practical implications of following their young adult career dreams.

Future career aspirations

Inspection of midlife career dreams revealed that both groups tended to be seeking work in the HS field. The young adult and midlife occupational dream categories of NFs were comparable, with the majority of NFs seeking to remain in the HS area. The surprise was the relatively high number of STs indicating a desire to change to HS related careers more congruent with developing their previously underdeveloped mental functions. Where STs wished to stay in BS, they typically expressed a desire to work more with their N and F mental functions by aspiring to roles they felt were more "enjoyable" and would provide the opportunity for greater engagement with community and family. Overall both groups reported a desire to pass on what they had learned and to help others – a theme congruent with Erikson's notion of generativity.

Of note for HR practitioners and career counsellors is that midlife employees have an innate aspiration for generativity that may manifest in a desire to develop and coach/mentor others in the workplace. Also, for some personality types (for example, STs), there may be a desire for a change in career direction that provides more opportunity for working in human services – an awareness of this may be invaluable in retaining midlife employees.

Job loss

A major theme apparent for NF males, but not reported by STs, was a strong sense of disillusionment and cynicism that resulted when they experienced job loss. NFs personalised job loss compared to STs and expressed anger and a strong sense of personal rejection compared to the STs who were more objective and accommodating. That NFs were more emotional is consistent with MBTI theory regarding the F preference.

There are clearly implications for HR practitioners and outplacement consultants regarding the different anticipated responses by midlife men of different personality preferences who experience job loss. Specifically, there is a need to value the difference responses to employee retrenchment and provide career transition assistance that responds to the various psychological needs of different personality types.

Importance of coaching/mentoring others and new work challenges

Different priorities were attached to career issues such as coaching/mentoring others and to a lesser extent experiencing new challenges by the two groups. Both of these

were of higher priority to NFs than STs. In addition, what constitutes a new challenge was perceived differently by the two groups. The NF need for new challenges related to the tendency to get bored easily and the subsequent desire to change jobs whereas STs indicated new challenges could be more readily achieved in their current work roles.

An awareness of personality preferences can assist HR professionals provide relevant development opportunities to midlife employees, especially in regards to the NF desire to coach/mentor others and the NF propensity for a career change to overcome boredom.

A limitation of the present study is the small number of participants and the selection bias. Participants were recruited through professional networks, were aware of their MBTI preferences and did not represent a cross section of the general male population. These factors may have accentuated possible group differences. None the less, it was broadly representative of the community in terms of income, educational levels, range of occupational groups and range of family types. Despite the limitations, differences between the two personality groups were apparent.

A second limitation is that the boundaries for midlife are not well defined. This study focused on males aged from 40 to 55. Erikson (1968) suggests that middle adulthood/midlife occurs between 35 and 60 years, Levinson (1978) and Jung (1933) believe midlife commences at 40, while Lachman (2001) has suggested midlife begins at 30 and ends at 75 years. Of note, in the present study, was that there was no clear age effect in the quality of the responses. We acknowledge that the issues reported in this sample of midlife men may not pertain just to midlife. The extent to which the factors identified in this study are unique to midlife needs to be explored by looking at a broader age range of participants.

A further limitation was that only two MBTI subtypes, in particular NF and STs, were compared. In future studies it may be instructive to examine other MBTI pairings (for example, NT versus SF, SF versus ST, etc.), whole preferences (such as INFJ versus ISFJ) and the order/sequence of the four mental functions. As a corollary, but not as a main aim, we investigated the notion of previously underdeveloped mental functions being acted upon in midlife. There was preliminary evidence in our study that this had occurred. A future study could more rigorously address this question.

Conclusion

The present study is consistent with Levinson and Jung's notion that midlife is a time of psychological change for men, particularly in regard to career and work. There is no support for the stereotypical view that men may be less motivated or less satisfied with their career in midlife (Kanfer & Ackerman 2004; O'Connor 1995). The study supports Levinson's notion that men see their career in a broader context in midlife as they look to attain greater balance in their lives. It is also consistent with the Jungian notion that men look to individuate in midlife and make more conscious choices, especially in regard to attaining greater work/life balance.

The findings support the hypothesis that personality type does influence the male experience of career in midlife. In regard to career dreams and aspirations, NFs were generally looking to remain in helping related work roles while STs were generally

looking to shift from business related to helping occupations. Midlife NF males compared to ST were more likely to harbour aspirations for greater self-determination and autonomy, report a sense of disillusionment and cynicism as a consequence of previous job loss and aspire to coach/mentor others in the workplace. Broadly, both groups had comments consistent with the need for generativity in midlife. This meta-need was evident in both groups, although the actual path was expressed differently for the two personality types.

The present study highlights the usefulness of personality assessment for employers in helping their employees more effectively manage their careers in midlife. Personality profiling can contribute to the implementation of personally meaningful and relevant career plans that enhance the ongoing growth, development and motivation of an organisation's human resources. In particular, with the looming departure from the labour market of increasing numbers of ageing baby boomers, proactive career development strategies that acknowledge differences in personality type can assist in retaining and developing midlife employees.

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