The Mid to Late Career Stage

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I am excited to introduce the first installment of the Career Column—a column focusing on career issues important (hopefully) to SIOP members at every stage of their careers and for nearly every job path. Each installment will examine a different career issue in-depth; for instance, everything from how to create research opportunities in the field, to developing strategies for finding time to publish research in applied jobs, to how to start your own consulting business. My plan is to gather information from experts in these areas to ensure the information is useful.

This column is a continuation of a column started by Dawn Riddle and Lori Foster that focused on issues predominantly important to those in their early careers. In contrast, this column will be more broad. The goal is to make each article relevant for a wide range of SIOP members: those in academia, in applied settings, and at various career stages.

Mid to Late Career Stage: Challenges and Strategies

Since previous career columns have examined issues of primary concern to those early in their careers, I thought it would be useful to take a step in the future and focus this first career column on those in their middle and late careers. However, those in the early career stages can learn about what it takes to “make it” and what to expect their careers might be like later on. In addition, those who are later in their careers may benefit from hearing about how other individuals deal with work–family balance, changing expectations, and so forth.

I identified a few people in the field (academics and consultants) who are considered prominent and successful I-O psychologists and asked them to answer a few questions about their current professional lives and also to think back on some vital experiences in the past that may have determined where they are now. Through these interviews I was able to identify some common themes.

Who was willing to help me? I was fortunate that six outstanding I-O psychologists were willing to take the time to speak with me about these issues. Deirdre Knapp, who works at Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO), graduated from Bowling Green State University in 1984. Deirdre is the head of the assessment, research, and analysis program at HumRRO. Frank Landy is a former SIOP president (1990–1991) and graduate of BGSU (1969). Frank started his career in academics but then transitioned into a career on the applied side. He now works as an expert witness for SHL Landy Jacobs,
Inc. Elaine Pulakos, a former SIOP president (1998–1999) is the head of Personnel Decisions Research Institutes’ (PDRI) Arlington, Virginia office. Elaine graduated from Michigan State University in 1984. Neal Schmitt, yet another former SIOP president (1989–1990), earned his degree from Purdue in 1972. Although he has been a professor at Michigan State University for a large part of his career, Neal has only recently taken on the role as the chair of the MSU Psychology Department. Lois Tetrick, a graduate of Georgia Tech (1983), is a professor at the University of Houston. Lois’s research focuses on issues related to occupational health. Finally, Steve Zaccaro graduated from the University of Connecticut (1981) and is now a professor at George Mason University. Steve conducts research on teams and leadership.

Other than the fact that these individuals have had (and continue to have) successful careers as I-O psychologists, they have also had varied experiences in I-O, taking on many different roles. These individuals have done everything from chairing a department, managing multiple grants, being actively involved in SIOP, and researching multiple different areas (e.g., selection, performance, groups and teams, and occupational health). As you will see, despite these diverse backgrounds, their answers were remarkably similar. Let’s take a closer look.

How have you stayed interested in the field throughout your career? Are the issues that motivate you as an I-O psychologist today the same as those that motivated you to go into the field in the first place? All of the I-O psychologists interviewed indicated that staying motivated has been easy because their roles have changed over the years. Therefore, they’re always doing something different, and new challenges present themselves at every turn. For instance, Neal indicated that when he began his career his focus was on developing students. However, now his role as a senior faculty member and the chair of the department allows him to develop young faculty as well. This presents new challenges and keeps him interested in his work.

Not only does work change as a function of new roles, but some of our experts indicated that their work varies on a daily basis. For instance, organizations vary tremendously and those doing consulting are always presented with new challenges because each organization has its own set of problems to deal with. In addition, most of those interviewed indicated that they have varied research interests that keep them motivated and those interests are constantly evolving. Overall, the consensus was that what motivates one later in one’s career changes as roles change and new experiences are encountered. Such change makes it easy to stay motivated and excited by work.

How have your responsibilities changed over your career? Have the changes been welcome? Once again, despite wide differences in career paths and areas of expertise, all experts indicated that their responsibilities have changed over the years, and all have enjoyed (and even welcomed) these changes. Some of these changes are slow, while others happen rather abruptly. For instance, those working in applied settings indicated their responsibilities
have changed from being primarily technical (e.g., conducting a job analysis) to being more managerial and supervisory (e.g., project management). This change happens gradually and naturally unfolds. Similar changes occur in academia, but these changes tend to occur more quickly with professors being expected to do more committee work once promoted. As Lois, who does considerable work with SIOP and APA, indicated she now contributes not only to science but also to the profession. It seems regardless of where you work, administrative responsibilities (internal and external) come with being more experienced.

However, there was a difference between those working in applied and academic settings. Those in academia indicated that they were still obligated to fulfill their original responsibilities even though they had new demands on their time. Professors are still expected to teach (and generally have the same teaching load), mentor just as many graduate students, and publish as much as they did before. However, they are also expected to take on greater administrative roles both within the university and within the professional community. Practitioners indicated that their responsibilities changed to a greater extent. So, while they are expected to take on a more managerial role, they perform less technical aspects of the job. This does not mean practitioners need not be proficient in the areas they were primarily responsible for early in their careers. As Elaine indicated, it’s still important to have the technical know-how as this is always an important part of the job, but more of one’s time is spent on administrative tasks later in one’s career.

With that said, it’s important to keep in mind that those who were interviewed are highly successful I-O psychologists. The practitioners interviewed indicated that while their jobs have changed over the years, their experiences may not be the path of the “typical” I-O psychologist. Only so many of us will be promoted to managerial or executive positions. The job will change much less for a practitioner who chooses not to take such roles or does not have the opportunity to do so. However, in academics, one is inevitably going to be expected to take on more administrative tasks as time goes on.

What KSAs are most crucial to your daily work? How do these KSAs differ from those that were important at other stages of your career? There was considerable consensus regarding the KSAs most relevant to success in middle and late career stages: technical skills (e.g., statistics), communication skills (both oral and written), interpersonal skills, multitasking and organization, problem solving, decision making, and leadership/supervision. No surprises there. While generally those interviewed indicated that the KSAs required for their jobs have not changed drastically, most indicated that there is now a greater emphasis on leadership skills. It seems all these KSAs are necessary throughout one’s career, but the importance and time spent using these KSAs fluctuates.

How have your personal and professional lives interacted over the course of your career? What strategies do you use to balance the two? This is where opinions diverged considerably. Some of those interviewed indicated that worklife and family were always in conflict, others suggest that
work–family balance has never been problematic, while still others suggested that one’s personal life has helped to shape one’s professional life. For instance, Frank indicated that he always makes time for travel, and these experiences have led to his interest in cross-cultural issues.

So, what do these experts do when personal and professional lives clash? Well, they had some insightful suggestions. First, some indicated they actively make time for rest and relaxation. They schedule it in if they have to, just to make sure they do it! Second, some involve their family in their work life whenever possible. For instance, they discuss work with the family or even have significant others and kids get involved in current projects (assuming they find it at least a little interesting). Third, ensure you get involved with your family members’ interests. For instance, coach your child’s team, or take a dance class with your significant other. The important thing is to make sure that you also value and devote time to the interests of family members. Finally, some experts indicated that hobbies are important. Even if you don’t have a hobby now, develop one. Perhaps develop a hobby that the entire family enjoys (e.g., skiing). Again, the key is to ensure you make time for these hobbies. But be forewarned, those interviewed indicated this is much easier said than done. Making time for one’s personal life can require a lot of planning and commitment.

What’s the biggest challenge you face in middle/late career? How are you meeting that challenge? This question elicited quite a few different responses. The biggest challenges included staying current with the enormous wealth of literature, to learning and adjusting to another new role, to deciding what to do next with one’s career. How do they deal with these challenges? If you’re like Frank and are concerned about staying current with the literature, why not write a textbook? That’s what he did to deal with this challenge. To learn a new role, simply work harder and organize better. The strategies for dealing with challenges were as varied as the challenges themselves.

What event or experience had the most crucial impact on your career? What is it about this experience that made it so crucial? Those interviewed listed many events that were important in shaping their careers. They involve getting a new job, writing a textbook, joining a SIOP committee, teaching abroad, being asked to be an editor or associate editor, and so forth. One constant is that the most important events were opportunities that required them to learn new things. Taking advantage of these opportunities expanded their skills and changed their interests, further directing their careers.

A good example of this was given by Deirdre. Not long after graduating, she was fortunate enough to get involved with Project A (first at ARI and then at HumRRO). This opportunity allowed her to work with some of the most prominent I-O psychologists in the country, and she was expected to do the same work they were doing. At first, this opportunity was a little intimidating. After all, some of the folks she was working with had decades of experience, while she only had a few years under her belt. However, Deirdre rose to the occasion and this turned out to be one of the most important experi-
ences in her career. It not only advanced her technical skills, but she was able to learn from some amazing people in the field. This experience also helped her become known in the I-O community. An experience like this can shape and direct a person’s career, so never shy away from such opportunities.

**What sorts of developmental opportunities are important for I-O psychologists at the middle and late career stages? How can one increase access to those opportunities?** A number of important developmental opportunities were offered by the panel of experts. First, try to work with and learn from people who have been successful. If you’re learning a new area or taking on a new role, seek out someone who has been successful in that area. You can usually find someone you work with or someone you’ve met through networking to serve this purpose. Second, middle and late career folks should seek out opportunities to apply I-O psychology in a broader range of areas. One way to do this would be to pursue connections with interdisciplinary centers at universities. Third, take advantage of potential new roles that will allow you to expand your skills and learn new things, whether it be serving as a journal editor, working with funding agencies, taking a position overseas, or taking on more administrative roles. Do not pass up opportunities that may lead to self-development, even if you initially feel like you don’t have the necessary skills. The consensus seems to be “you’ll learn what you need to on the job.” The benefits that can be gained from taking advantage of such opportunities far outweigh any potential negative consequences. Fourth, you can develop skills by learning through more formal settings. Attend a workshop or seminar to learn something you’ve always wanted to learn.

Overall, these experts felt that one should constantly strive to learn new things, and a great way to do this is to seek experiences that you’ve never had before. This also helps one remain interested in the field and motivated.

**What stage of your career has been most difficult and challenging and why?** This question elicited one of two answers from the panel. First, about half indicated the early career stage was the toughest part. There’s so much to be learned and everything is new that this stage can be a little hairy at times. Second, others indicated that every stage of their careers has presented new challenges because each requires one to take on new roles and learn and use a different set of skills. So, for these individuals, all stages present new and equally difficult challenges.

**Knowing what you know now, is there anything you would have done differently earlier in your career?** Most of those interviewed indicated there’s nothing they would do differently. All of their experiences contributed to where they are today (the good and the bad). This isn’t surprising when you consider that all of those interviewed are quite successful. Had I interviewed a bunch of underemployed I-O psychologists, I’m sure I would have gotten very different answers to this question. However, a few individuals indicated that they would take more personal time and not work as hard as they have throughout their career. This is probably good advice for all of us.
Conclusions

What have we learned from all this? First, with few exceptions the answers were remarkably consistent across those in academics and those in consulting. Regardless of career path, a very similar set of KSAs seem to be required for all of their jobs, and most are similarly trying to balance professional and personal lives. It seems the biggest difference between these two career paths is that in consulting one’s job may change more fundamentally as time goes on, and this change is generally gradual. In academics, a similar change occurs, but while being less drastic, it happens more suddenly (generally shortly after tenure).

Some of those I spoke with indicated the nature of role change is not a trivial matter to consider when choosing a career path. In any job one’s role will change across time. However, in some instances these changes may be greater. One may go into consulting because of the love of the technical aspects of the work, but possibly, assuming the person is good at those technical aspects, different responsibilities will be placed on him or her. In particular, one may spend increasingly more time managing projects and people. If this is something you would absolutely hate to do, you need to consider what this means for you. Basically, when choosing a career, it’s not enough to consider the type of work that you would be asked to do now, but you should also consider how that job may change and if you’d enjoy doing the things that you’ll eventually be asked to perform.

A second important theme is to take advantage of opportunities that require you to learn new things. Assuming you’re minimally qualified for a new role, do it if you think you can learn something from the experience. Do not question whether you have the ability, if you have the time, and so forth. These experiences are by far the ones that are most likely to be crucial to your career.

Finally, make time for a personal life. This is good advice for several reasons. Ensuring you don’t get too obsessed with work is simply healthy. It may also help you enjoy your work more. If you have a chance to be away from work and de-stress, you’re much more likely to continue to be motivated by what you do. Although it may be difficult to balance work and family life, it’s necessary. Schedule in personal time if you have to, but make sure you do it.

More to Come

Be sure to read the next issue’s article on conducting field research. I’ll be picking the brains of some experts to determine the best ways to incorporate research data collection into field projects and how practitioners make time to present and publish these findings.