

# Stuck in the Middle

Finding health and employee  
focussed solutions to prevent  
the mid-career crisis



Specsavers

# Introduction

**Work has a midlife crisis. Middle-age workers are some of our most valuable, but their experience at work is suffering. These employees deserve support made for them, tailored to where they are in their careers and their lives. For businesses, it's not just about ticking boxes – it's about keeping your best people at their best. Getting older is a fact of life, but dwindling job satisfaction and reduced productivity don't have to be.**

We don't mark the halfway point in our careers, which according to the ONS comes around the age of 45, but we should certainly have an eye on it.

Many middle-age workers will find themselves making big decisions, running teams, and with a seat at the top table of leading businesses. But this seniority can coincide with a drop in the support they get from their employer, at a time when they're also juggling childcare, changes in their health, and a rapidly evolving working world.

Our research found that a huge number of middle-career workers feel left out of the conversation on wellbeing, just as their health begins to affect their work.

Employers are always building what they offer to their people, but they can neglect long-standing employees or those at the mid-way points of their careers.

The eyes are just one part of the body that naturally changes as we get older, but there remains a knowledge gap on how these changes impact performance and happiness at work. So, we asked middle-career employees (aged 35–54) their concerns about their health and the world of work as they grow together. This report reveals we can do more to solve work's midlife crisis.

# What you will find in **this report**

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Our research shows that middle-aged (35–54) employees are struggling on a number of fronts and feel uniquely vulnerable in the workplace.

It's a tough time to be a middle-career worker.

20%

say they fear not having the right skills for the future

25%

say they fear being made redundant

Health and eye health issues are slowing people down.

21%

lose time struggling to read text on their PC or laptop

61%

of middle-aged workers told us that health issues affect their ability to work

26%

told us tasks take them longer at work because they can't see clearly



### And it's costing us

It is estimated eye-sight issues slowing down workers could cost an organisation

**£3,493**

per year per employee

**Scale this up for 34 million UK workers, and the cost to the UK economy is £21 billion**

\*Cost of 21bn to the UK economy based on 228 working days (weekends, annual leave and bank holidays removed from calendar year) and ONS average £37,430 per annum salary. 34 million people are employed in the UK according to the latest figures

01

Out of Sight,  
**Out of Mind**

**The conversation on age in work is bookended by discussions on ageism at one end and the new generation at the other, leaving middle career workers stuck in the middle, without advocates for their experience. They're facing more challenges than ever, yet focus often moves to supporting those at the beginning and end of their careers.**


Job satisfaction has long been viewed as a u-shaped curve, with a mid-career crisis pitched as a fact of working life for individuals in their 40s and 50s. New research from the University of Surrey suggests the highest skilled professionals suffer from a mid-career dip, with the report's authors calling on businesses to adapt their support systems for employees entering their 40s and 50s.

We wanted to dig deeper into how middle-aged workers feel about the support they get from their employers, so we asked them.

The answer was that a huge number – four in ten (39%) employees aged between 35 and 54 believe that companies are prioritising benefits and support for younger generations. This rises even further to half (53%) for senior managers and a majority (65%) for C-level executives, underscoring that it really is our highest performers who are being left behind by support structures, just as their lives and their health begin to get in the way.

Clearly, this vital but underappreciated slice of the UK workforce needs more support to help them get off the u-shaped curve, but also to enable them to do their best work driving the businesses they lead forwards. There's no doubt that the mid-career blind spot is having an impact on morale, retention, and ultimately the bottom line for many companies, so acting on it isn't just the right thing to do, it's a smart business decision.





The **mid-career crisis does matter**, because it happens when there are real challenges happening outside of work. **The amount we're responsible for, at work and at home**, hits its peak as we get to the middle of our careers. Many people are caring for kids of various ages, many caring for parents, and many are doing both, all as their health and how they care for themselves changes.

Combine this with increasing responsibility and pressure at work, and it really is a perfect storm. Mid-career employees not feeling seen isn't necessarily a failure on the part of HR teams – these high-performers are the least likely to speak up when they need help, so **it's on us to be proactive with internal comms on the support we're providing.**

Tony Bough, Head of Health Safety and Reporting, RSA Insurance

# 02

**New  
Challenges**



**After years of grafting and learning in our early years, the middle part of our careers is a time of change for many workers. For some, children are growing up fast, demanding more of their time and attention, while changes in their health and planning for the future pull them in another direction entirely. With a world of work that's evolving faster than ever, it's easy to see why even our most capable professionals are experiencing the mid-career crisis.**


The results of our research were unequivocal on the impact of changing personal health – six in ten (61%) middle-age workers said it affects their ability to work. For the most senior people we surveyed, business owners themselves, this rises to almost three in four (75%). Health-related benefits regularly come out on top as the most popular and sought out by employees, but wellbeing strategies rarely grow with the people they're made to serve.

Eye health is a prime example – our eyes naturally change as we get older, and this has an unavoidable impact on our work.

**More than a quarter of employees (26%) told us that tasks take them longer at work because they can't see clearly.**

One of the most common changes to eyesight is presbyopia. It's a normal part of ageing on the eyes, in which the lens becomes less flexible, meaning it can't change shape as easily to focus on near objects, such as phones, books, or computer screens.

Ever seen someone hold their phone further away from their face, swapped for a pair of reading glasses, or increased the font size on their laptop? That's presbyopia.



**Everyone has encountered presbyopia**, and many people may have experienced it as they get older, even if they've previously not been a glasses wearer or had any other issues with their eyes. **It's a natural part of how our eyes age**, but it's one that people avoid, often because it means facing the fact that they're getting older and their health is changing.

What we hear from people who we help with presbyopia is that life and work become much easier, and many don't even realise that the workarounds were getting in the way. **For those that work with screens, there is serious anxiety about speaking up about presbyopia**, and we will have a positive impact if we can change that.

Kartik Bharadia, Clinical Support Consultant, Specsavers

Presbyopia is nothing to worry about from a health perspective, but that doesn't mean we can ignore the very real effects it and other health challenges have at work.

Our research reveals that presbyopia and eye health issues are slowing people down at work, particularly those who spend their entire careers working with digital screens:



This isn't just making life harder for people – it's costing us time and money. According to our research, the average UK worker loses 41 minutes per day due to eyesight issues, and it's those leading businesses that are most likely to be hampered by them.



## The Bottom Line

**Losing 41 minutes a day** isn't just a frustration for employees – it's actually costing businesses money.

For an employee on the average UK salary, it **translates to £3,493 in lost time every year.**

Scale this up for 34 million UK workers, and **our economy could be losing £21 billion to eye health issues each year.**

This is **time and money that we can't afford to lose**, and which we don't have to.

Eyecare is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to health issues affecting people at work, but this research underlines its significance. If something else was slowing us down at work this much, we'd do something about it.

### **So, why aren't we acting on eyecare?**

One answer is that people don't see changes in their eye health as a work thing. People rightly understand that presbyopia and other age-related conditions are a natural part of getting older. However, this means that they don't ask for or believe they can get support from their employer, despite the huge impact it has on their work.

### **Eye health is a work thing, and it's time for us to see it like that.**

**Presbyopia and other issues don't start at work, but they can finish there. With the right support, employers have an opportunity to make work and life better for their most powerful people.**

# 03

**Support that  
Sees You**



**The answer to work's midlife crisis isn't a bolt-on package for middle career employees. It's a new approach that puts people's experience at work first, at every stage of their career. It means loud, proud, and proactive communication on how people can look after themselves at work, and how the business is supporting them.**

This doesn't mean the end of wellbeing strategies that support people at the beginning or the end of their careers, as a method to seal the deal in the battle for talent. Instead, it means a package that evolves as people move through the business and up the ladder, and a refocusing of internal comms on the middle career employees currently on the wrong end of that u-shaped curve.

These employees need to feel that the package is designed for them, and that they can use it to address anything that's slowing them down at work, even if it is a natural part of getting older. Employee eyecare is the prime example of a compliance measure that delivers more than ticking a regulatory box, and instead can keep delivering as people grow in their careers. Providing eye tests and glasses for employees that use screens is a legal requirement for businesses, and many are aware of that when they join a business. However, they're less likely to turn to their HR team for help when their vision changes as a normal part of getting older, even as it impacts their work.

Specsavers corporate eyecare vouchers are a compliance tool that allow middle career employees to quickly and easily fix an issue that's slowing them down at work, and come away with a new set of glasses that will make life better at home as well. Ease of access should never be underestimated as a factor in benefit uptake, particularly for more senior colleagues without the time to faff around with an inconvenient process.

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The **Specsavers corporate vouchers** are a real hit with our people, partly because the **process is so simple**, but also because they know what they're going to get when they arrive at the opticians. It fits into how they're caring for their eyes outside of work, and is something they can tick off the list without added hassle. For our most senior colleagues, **this fast, simple and discreet process is worth its weight in gold.**

**Tony Bough, Head of Health Safety and Reporting, RSA Insurance**

Tackling the stigma attached to asking for help or bringing health issues into the workplace should be a real priority in the creation of wellbeing strategies that really support people as they navigate the middle of their careers. Despite their seniority and experience, middle career workers often feel vulnerable. In our research, a quarter of 35- to 54-year-olds (25%) said being made redundant was one of their biggest fears in the workplace, and a fifth (20%) told us they were scared of not having the right skills for the future.

There's no easy antidote for this, partly because it highlights the experience of being part of a working world that is changing faster than ever. However, a wellbeing strategy that keeps delivering will be a reassuring constant for people as they navigate change at work and at home, and it will pay dividends for businesses as well as the people in them.

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04

**A Better Middle**

**There is no reason that work has to get worse in the middle. The right support can help employees stay at their best even as their life, work, and health change. For many businesses, the ingredients are already there. Providing access to eyecare is a legal requirement, but doing it right, in a way that encourages employees at all levels to take advantage of what they're entitled to and address issues that are slowing them down, will make a serious difference beyond compliance.**

The u-shaped curve is having a measurable impact on bottom lines, as are eye and other health issues, but it isn't set in stone. At a time when businesses are under pressure from all sides, helping middle-career employees is something they can do now, and which will keep delivering in the future.

The cost of not acting is clear: 41 minutes per day, £3,493 per employee, and £21 billion a year. There is a clear business case for addressing eye health, but the case for better support for middle-career employees goes far beyond the bottom line. It's about creating a working world that looks after its most powerful people, that allows them to bring their whole selves to work, and that steps up to share the load of external challenges.

**We can do more  
for middle career  
employees, so what  
are we waiting for?**