MIT Midcareer Acceleration Program: Building "On-Ramps" for Midcareer Professionals

Jennifer Stine
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

CONTEXT

Educators, career counseling offices and alumni associations know well the stories of mid-career challenges. Courted by companies at graduation and quickly promoted in early years, well-educated professionals may assume that success will always be theirs for the asking, even if they take time off. And it can be equally easy for universities to assume that graduates who are unable to sustain career success are simply opting out or lacking in ambition. But professionals who leave their careers, even for a short time, face real obstacles on reentry. The truth is, it is far easier to leave a career behind than it is to get it back on track.

In March 2005, Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce were among the first to publish comprehensive data quantifying the negative impact that leaving a career for even a short time can have on employability and salary.[1] Focused on highly qualified women, the study showed that while most women leave work with the intention of reentering, many do not, and those who do lose earning power.

Specifically Hewlett and Luce found that while 93 percent of women in their study wanted to reenter the workforce, only 74 percent of women managed to do so, and of these, only 40 percent returned to full-time, mainstream jobs.[2] Women who were able to reenter their professions paid

 Jennifer Stine, formerly Executive Director of Professional Education Programs, School of Engineering, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is the Managing Director of Programs in Professional Education, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University.

a large financial penalty as well. The study found on average women lost 18 percent of their earning power, with those who spent more than 3 years out losing 37 percent.[3] In Hewlett and Luce's words, "off-ramps are around every curve in the road, but once a woman has taken one, on-ramps are few and far between—and extremely costly."[4]

Each year the workforce is permanently losing educated, high-potential professional women and men from key sectors due to short-term needs for work flexibility.[5] How, then, might we build on-ramps that can be used by mid-career professionals seeking to reenter their professions?

MARKET RESEARCH

Over the past three years business schools have taken the lead by launching short courses targeted mainly at MBA graduates to address reentry challenges. Notable among these are executive education courses at Harvard, Tuck, Babson, and Wharton, among others.[6] These programs generally follow a 5-15 day format and provide opportunities for networking, career counseling, and some updating in current business topics. Costs are between $5,000 and $10,000.

In 2005, the MIT Professional Education Programs office chose to develop the MIT Midcareer Acceleration Program, an on-ramp program specifically for high-potential individuals with technical backgrounds, including our own alumni/ae. There were no models for our program, so we initiated a three-part market research project to inform the design. This research included focus groups, interviews with local HR professionals, and an Internet-based survey.

Two focus groups were conducted, both of alumnae. The first included women over the age of 40 and currently employed. The second included women under the age of 40 and currently taking time off from their careers. Both groups were given the general challenge: "Should we develop a program to address mid-career challenges and if so, what should it include?" The two groups saw the problem quite differently but were equally informative. The older and employed group viewed a program focused on women only quite favorably and felt the most important topics at mid-career were leadership, management, and "soft skills" like communication and assertiveness. They ended the focus group meeting by sharing email addresses with each other and promising to stay in touch.

The younger group had a strongly negative reaction to a women-only program. They felt it would imply that women "needed extra help" and

could even hurt their careers. Having experienced first-hand the challenges of reentry, they were less focused on general management skills and much more focused on career counseling and concrete activities that would help fill a gap in a résumé. They were also looking for ways to demonstrate that they had kept up in their technical fields even when they were not working. Both groups shared the perception that they needed to have better technical skills just to compete with their male counterparts.

Out of these focus groups, we developed an initial design focused on technology updates and some soft-skills training in a short-course format. The next step was to take this design to 15 senior hiring professionals at local technical companies. During a telephone interview the hiring professionals were asked: "If you were interviewing two candidates with similar backgrounds, one who had continuous work experience, and the other who had a resume gap but had attended a program that looked something like this…, would you consider them equally? If not, what should be added to the program so that you would?"

Again, the results were fascinating. While there was a general belief that "once a good engineer, always a good engineer," a short program (2-6 weeks) was not seen as a credible way of closing a résumé gap for technical professionals. A much longer program—6 months to a year—would be needed to provide the necessary skills and demonstrate an individual's commitment to returning to the workforce. Both soft skills and ability to speak in technically up-to-date terms about a field were seen as important. The majority interviewed also said an internship would be an important part of the program.

Our last step was to do an Internet-based survey of a larger group to test further some of the assumptions and conclusions as well as to get feedback on pricing. Early on we knew participants would be paying for the program themselves. Self-funding for a year-long program is a major consideration, especially for someone currently out of work. This barrier was confirmed by the survey, and we worked to make the program cost effective. We also learned that demonstrated outcomes—internships, jobs at good companies—by the first graduates were critical for long-term program success.

INTEGRATED, INTERDISCIPLINARY DESIGN

With at least some of the design done, we took the results of the market research to both faculty and career counseling experts for additional develop-

ment. Our final design resulted in a quarter-time program over an academic year that included a four-day orientation, a full-semester academic course, multiple workshops, an applied learning project, and an internship.

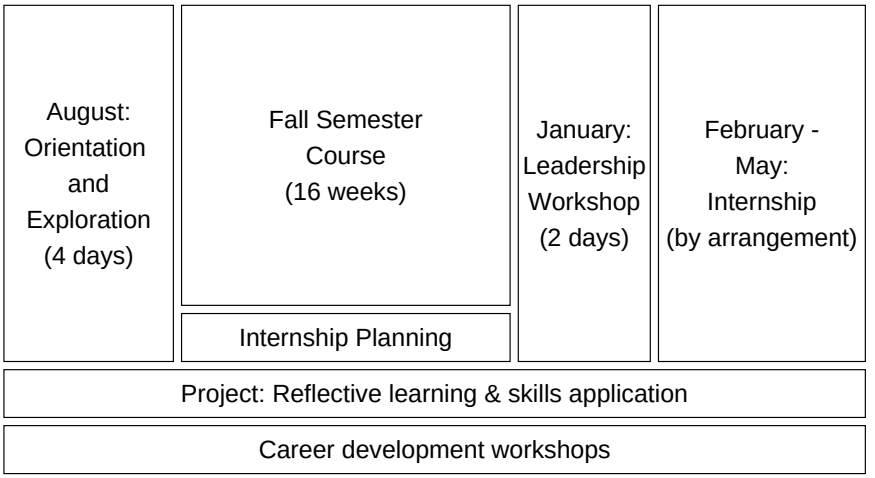

Figure 1: 10-month mid-career program design

Participants choose the course subject, project topic, and internship, allowing professionals from different fields to attend the program together and still pursue specialized education in their technical area. They select a course from the general course catalogue based on their interests and goals. By completing a course they update their technical skills and fluency. Many of our students they have never had the opportunity to take an academic course based solely on personal and professional interest, an undertaking we find leads to a high degree of engagement and satisfaction.

The project involves identifying an innovation or topic of relevance to their industry area, then interviewing both a faculty member and an outside professional on recent innovations in that area of interest. They then write a 10-page paper and do a presentation to the other participants where they advocate for the advance or approach. For example, one student interested in biotechnology focused her project on a spray-on medical adhesive in the early stages of development that could decrease surgical complications.

Students are responsible for arranging their own internships, and the internship process serves as a warm-up for a formal job search. Most internships, though unpaid, have been at or near full-time. Because we do not know the subject area interests of the students before they join (and

sometimes, part of the work the student is doing is to focus this interest), we do not arrange internships in advance. But we do connect them with broader networks on campus and also work with them individually to identify companies and make inquiries.

The orientation and workshops are shared learning for all participants, and include "exploration series" lectures by faculty in their areas of expertise that re-immerse the students in academic and technical subjects, as well as sessions led by organizational development and career experts on topics like transition, networking, résumé development, and negotiation. The two-day leadership workshop is generally the students' introduction to leadership training, and is designed to raise awareness and build management skills. Both the orientation and the workshops include many exercises and opportunities for peer coaching.

Participants must submit applications for admission, which are evaluated based on their overall qualifications and ability to do MIT-level work. Thus far, the first group of nine has graduated the ten-month program and the second group of six is part way through. Our first group included both women and men equally, the second is all women. Both have been about half alumni, and ages have ranged from early 30s to early 50s. Most participants have advanced degrees, and most, but not all, are in technical fields. The majority took time off of work to have children, but several joined the program to redirect their careers or because of a spouse's move.

The 10-month, part-time format has been well received by participants, and has felt to some, if anything, too short and full. The balance of serious academic content, both in the course and orientation, with career coaching and development, has also been well received. All but one of the first group seeking employment found it within six months of graduating. One graduate is starting his own company.

CHALLENGES

Even with the backing of a major university and highly qualified participants, getting a career back on track is no easy proposition. When the program was first envisioned, the focus was updating technical knowledge and skills, with the assumption that some recent education would facilitate reentry. But as the market research showed and the experiences of our initial participants confirmed, a more holistic approach is needed for mid-career reentry. Updating technical knowledge and skills is important, but it is only one part of the picture.

One of the first challenges we encountered was financial and emotional—it takes a lot of confidence and support for an individual to be willing to invest 10 months and close to $10,000 in themselves and their career. Although it can be a means to a next job, it can be difficult to justify the investment. At the same time, given the real barriers reentering professionals face, we know that it might be the only way for them to rejoin their profession.

Our market research emphasized that potential applicants wanted to know where past participants were placed in internships and jobs before they would make a decision to enroll. But to really justify the time and financial commitment, the value of the program also has to extend beyond a first job. It needs to initiate a forward trajectory for the next years or even the next decade. To achieve this we make a long-term commitment to participants, which can extend beyond the immediate program. We also run information sessions and have in-depth discussions with potential participants prior to enrolling them.

Once enrolled, participants often need frequent contact and ongoing support. As a group they are at varied stages in the career process; some will come in with considerable focus and specific actionable goals, such as starting a company or finding a position as a lab scientist in the biotech industry, whereas others have more general goals or aspirations, such contributing to third-world development or finding work that is more meaningful. Many are also using the year to reorganize their family responsibilities, such as putting a child in daycare or starting school. On top of this they are going back to school in a competitive academic environment for the first time in what may have been many years.

Internships are another challenge. One of the clearest directions from our market research was that the program should include an internship. While this is a well-known model for undergraduates, the area of mid-career internships (also sometimes called "adult" internships) is a new one. At a high level, most agree it is a great-sounding idea and can be a win for both the sponsoring company and the individual: the company has the chance to preview a potentially hirable employee and at the same time benefit from his or her experience; the individual gets the immediate skills and experience needed to bridge a gap and get the next position. But for many hiring managers a mid-career internship is a new idea, and does not fit into existing hiring structures or calendars. Arranging an internship can take a lot of footwork and an open-minded contact. More widespread

adoption of mid-career internships by companies would be of great benefit to reentry professionals.

A final challenge was raised by several faculty who reviewed our program, as well as by some participants: Are you offering enough coursework? From a learning standpoint, more coursework would be beneficial. In part, the design decision was made on a financial basis. Coursework comes with a minimum tuition. All of our participants are all self-funding and find the tuition for even a single course a major investment. Requiring several courses, or even a full-year of coursework, while it would have academic benefits, would make the program even less accessible to many in our audience.

Our response was to build course flexibility into the program, with additional tuition charges. Participants can enroll in more than one course in the fall, and they can elect a research option and take a second course, or do directed research in the spring. Provided they are in good academic standing, they also have the option of enrolling in additional coursework after the conclusion of the program. Students electing a spring course or research do not complete an internship; however, for those who really need to retool or upgrade their technical skills, or who are pursuing a career as an entrepreneur, this is a good option.

LOOKING AHEAD

An advantage of working in continuing and professional education is the opportunity to innovate in a shorter time frame. In the early 1990s companies started demanding that executive and professional education be designed to support their strategic goals rather than to deliver general education. Since then a variety of innovations have taken root, including more modular designs at both the course and program levels, increased use of leadership training and applied learning projects, and greater integration of company- or industry-specific content. Some of these innovations are making their way into the general curriculum, especially in practice-based schools.

Programs that address the needs of reentry mid-career professionals are new opportunities to innovate as additional factors are in play. Employing modular educational designs allows for greater subject area flexibility and group learning. Content and delivery need to be tuned so as to be directly applicable to an individual's career stage, but this has to be done through a learning experience and not by reiterating standard advice on a job search

or a résumé. Additional synergies exist by linking mid-career programs strongly to local companies, who know the value of a highly capable mid-career hire, but do not necessarily have programs or processes in place to locate these individuals.

A second important consideration is how we in continuing and professional education are contributing to the quality and composition of the workforce. In science and engineering, many initiatives look at increasing the pipeline of women into degree programs and careers, but few address the potential impacts of the "leaky pipeline" that exists after a career has begun.[7] Yet it is known that women, in particular, are more subject to career change or career exit in science and engineering fields.[8]

Career exit without reentry has a lasting impact on workforce quality and on gender balance. In a study of career retention of women in information technology, Paula Stephan and Sharon Levin found that women are more likely to leave the labor force than are men, and they do not return to their technical fields. In particular they found that the female information technology (IT) workforce in 1999 would have been about 40 percent larger if women who had worked in IT in 1993 were still working in IT then.[9]

We cannot just educate for a competitive and diverse workforce and expect it to always be there. While it is important that employers continue to address needs for work flexibility, mentoring, and advancement, universities who care about workforce competitiveness and gender diversity can also ask themselves not only what they are doing to develop their graduates, but also how are they helping those graduates stay on paths to contribute to workforce competitiveness throughout their careers.

Any educational program is built on the ideas and contributions of many. We are grateful to the Lord Foundation, the Cambridge-MIT Institute, and the MIT School of Engineering for their financial support, and to William Lucas for his insight into these issues and assistance with the initial proposal. Professor Dick K.P. Yue provided faculty oversight and strong enthusiasm for the program as well as contributing significantly to the design and delivery. Bob Klein, Greg Fitzgerald, and Jennifer Clark of Advanced Marketing Science, Inc., and Dee Moore made significant contributions in the area of market research. Jiahong Juda, Corvis Catsouphes, Pam Lassiter, Barbara Peacock-Coady, and Chris Resto all contributed substantially to the design and content. Mary Hertema-Miller and Dawna Levenson have both contributed significantly as program directors, and

Beverly Foxx as the program administrator. And most importantly, we would like to thank our initial participants for believing in themselves and taking a concrete step toward their future.

ENDNOTES

1. Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Carolyn Buck Luce, "Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success," *Harvard Business Review*, March 2005, 11pp.
2. Sylvia Ann Hewlett, *Off-Ramps and On-Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success* (Harvard Business School Press, 2007), 43.
3. Ibid, 45.
4. Hewlett and Luce, "Off-ramps", 5.
5. These include having and caring for young children, caring for elderly or sick family members, separation or divorce, and relocation of a spouse, as well as economic restructuring or significant changes in corporate culture. While statistically women tend to be more affected, the need for work flexibility affects both women and men. See, for example, Robert Drago, Mark Wooden, and David Black, "Who Wants Flexibility? Changing Work Hours Preferences and Life Events," IZA Discussion Paper No. 2404, October 2006, and Pamela Stone and Meg Lovejoy, "Fast-Track Women and the 'Choice' to Stay Home," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 596, (Nov, 2004): 62-83.
6. Executive education programs include: "Back in Business: Invest in your Return" at Tuck, http://www.tuck.dartmouth.edu/exec/targeted_audiences/back_in_business.html; UBS Career Comeback at Wharton, http://executiveeducation.wharton.upenn.edu/open-enrollment/leadership-development-programs/ubs-career-comeback-professional-women.cfm; and "A New Path" at Harvard Business School, http://www.exed.hbs.edu/programs/path/print.html. An industry-based program and Lehman Brothers is described in Jessica Marquez, "Bringing Professional Women Back Into the Workforce," *Workforce Management*, (April 9, 2007), 20-25.
7. While this is true of industry, a larger body of research does exist on female faculty pipeline issues in academia.
8. Anne E. Preston, "Why Have all the Women Gone? A Study of Exit of Women from the Science and Engineering Professions," *American Economic Review* (December, 1994), 1446-1462, found that more than 20 percent of all women working in science and engineering in 1982 had left these occupations by 1989, almost twice the percentage of men.
9. Paula E. Stephan and Sharon G. Levin, "Leaving Careers in IT: Gender Differences in Retention," *Journal of Technology Transfer*, 30 (2005), 383-96.