

INSIGHT

Brandon Koh

Watching Michelle Yeoh and Ke Huy Quan talk about success at 50 can inspire action – the type that makes you want to haul yourself to work and get cracking again.

“Ladies, don’t let anyone tell you that you are ever past your prime,” Yeoh, 60, declared after winning her first Academy Award for Best Actress in *Everything Everywhere All At Once*.

“For so many years, I was afraid I had nothing left to offer, that no matter what I did, I would never surpass what I achieved as a kid,” Quan, 51, said earlier in January at the Golden Globes.

He went on to win an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor for his role as Waymond Wang in the same film.

This upbeat narrative reinforcing the idea that we can achieve anything we put our minds to can give us hope of flourishing anew at midlife, but the problem arises when it gives people false hope because it doesn’t account for the reality of ageing bodies and slowing minds.

Far better then to be clear-eyed and tackle head-on the more common experience most of us have – that of peaking in our 30s and 40s.

This is something most of us practical-minded folk understand. According to a Randstad survey published in 2020, while Singaporeans, on average, expect stagnation to occur at the age of 48, younger adults think they will stagnate by 41.

Time eventually confronts us with the truth that our best career days are in the past.

Professionals in the creative industry experience this peak earlier.

“It is exceedingly likely that my greatest success is behind me,” author Elizabeth Gilbert reflects in her TED talk, as she bares her anxieties about how her future work will seem inferior to her bestseller, *Eat, Pray, Love*.

THE REALITY OF CAREER STAGNATION

Psychologists call this experience career stagnation – the involuntary end of one’s career development.

Sometimes, it is marked by fewer promotions and raises, while others feel a deep dissatisfaction with the opportunities for progression and personal growth at work. You can work like a mule yet feel like you’re going nowhere.

Research by University of Erlangen-Nuremberg professor Andrea Abele and her colleagues on the causes of career stagnation suggests that individual, organisational and labour market factors all play a role.

Much depends on people’s attitudes and their translation of goals into action. Individuals with lower self-confidence, unclear goals and a passive approach to careers are at risk of earlier stagnation.

The researchers found that individuals confident about their abilities and career choices often

set more ambitious career goals, and pursue them more fervently, which may translate into more career satisfaction, performance and growth.

Somewhat counterintuitively, high-performing individuals might feel more keenly the impact of a career cul-de-sac. Even with a higher salary and status, they experience significantly greater

dissatisfaction when unable to reconcile high expectations of what scaling to the top of their game should feel like.

Part of this arises because they tie personal success to extrinsic goals like the acquisition of money, power and status – objects people chase after in their youth, only to find they bring little joy at the end of the day.

KEEPING PACE WITH RAPID CHANGE

Career stagnation can also be caused by various labour market factors, such as an economic downturn that stalls one’s promotion trajectory or technological advances that challenge one’s skills and adaptability.

Recently released artificial intelligence natural-language processing and image generation tools like ChatGPT and Dall-E 2 have caused quite a stir, showing that technological advances can threaten even the creative skill sets of writing and visual illustration – skills once thought to be outside the remit of robots. Furthermore, even young

Michelle Yeoh, Ke Huy Quan and the myth of career success at every age

Most of us will peak in our 40s and it takes hard work to avoid career stagnation



Best Actress Michelle Yeoh and Best Supporting Actor Ke Huy Quan of the movie *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. In the wake of their Oscar success, the upbeat narrative reinforcing the idea that we can achieve anything we put our minds to can give us hope of flourishing anew at midlife, but the problem arises when it gives people false hope because it does not account for the reality of ageing bodies and slowing minds, says the writer. PHOTO: REUTERS

children are trained in programming today, while many working adults struggle to find the time and mental space to retrain themselves.

Even if one’s job is not immediately threatened, these advances spur a harrowing feeling that one’s use in the labour market will soon be outpaced and one made obsolete.

TAKING A PROTEAN CAREER ATTITUDE, ADOPTING A GROWTH MINDSET

Individuals can combat stagnation by exploring ways to build their self-confidence, and redefine their career goals and the core values they wish to embody in their life’s work. A wealth of research indicates that those with a flexible attitude towards their career options as jobs evolve are less prone to stagnation.

These individuals manage their career choices proactively, based on personal values rather than organisational expectations or material rewards. They pick up skills needed to harness technology without being told. And they do not passively rely on the progression opportunities their current employer supplies.

Studies by Antwerp Management School professor Ans De Vos show that individuals with protean attitudes often proactively seek out opportunities, both within and outside the organisation, to make their ideal careers a reality.

They also more readily accept temporary or lateral job movements, which may diversify their experiences and arrest stagnation when a promotion opportunity is unavailable right away.

That is not to say that these individuals have it all figured out, but that they took pains to work through problems and spot fresh opportunities – like what Quan did in jumping back into acting after seeing *Crazy Rich Asians*’ huge success.

This is what US professor Carol Dweck defines as having a “growth mindset” – the simple but powerful idea that one’s abilities can grow, given enough opportunity, time and effort.

MENTORING AND ITS LIMITATIONS

A final word. It has often been asked whether mentorship plays a role in tackling stagnation, especially because such programmes have gained substantial traction in recent years as a means to break the glass ceiling for women, help young people integrate into the workplace, and boost professional growth.

Research suggests that mentoring often self-selects the high-achieving. Without a formal system, rising stars and overachievers striving for power and achievement are more likely to seek mentorship compared with those looking to embody their self-directed values, Professor Abele found.

Mentors also tend to seek out existing high-performing mentees,

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New pinnacle of success less likely in middle age

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and only those who find satisfaction in the process are more willing to work with diamonds in the rough willing to put in the hours and learn.

Stipulated meeting frequencies with mentors from a different department can help with maintaining tempo and success, research by US business professor

Belle Ragins and her colleagues found. But despite the good intentions, there’s little stopping the formal system from becoming a check-box exercise where people go through the motions instead of seriously investing in difficult steps to help underachievers with less confidence break out of a rut. All in all, in this tale of success for Yeoh and Quan, luck has played a big part. Jackie Chan had

turned down the lead role, leaving directors Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert to rewrite the show for a female lead that eventually wound up on Yeoh’s lap. Needless to say, a supporting male actor was needed and Quan benefited immensely. All this is not to negate the fact that both Asian actors had worked hard for years to get to the Oscars.

But far better to start first with

the more realistic acknowledgement that the onset of middle age makes the likelihood of bursting through with a new pinnacle of success low. It’s better to put in the hard work needed to sustain a meaningful career than to believe in the fairy tale that we can peak in our career at every age.

Success might not require clutching an Oscar award at 50 in

front of a global audience, but simpler things like contributing back to the workplace, learning a new skill, or even mentoring a young colleague.

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