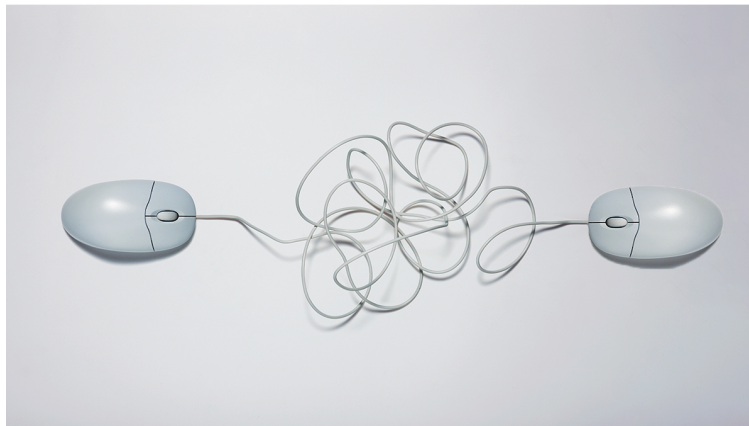**Harvard Business Review**

Managing People

It's Time to Free the Middle Manager

by Brian Elliott

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Summary.   As organizations shift toward more distributed, asynchronous workforces, the traditional role of a middle manager — monitoring productivity, optimizing individual performance, etc. — is becoming increasingly redundant. Instead of simply routing...   **more**

The shift to remote work has taken its toll on us all, but middle managers have faced particular challenges over the last year. A global survey of over 3,000 remote knowledge workers found that middle managers (defined as those managing 1-6 people) are 46% less satisfied with their jobs than senior executives (those managing at least 15 people), they have struggled more than twice as much as executives when it comes to maintaining a sense of belonging, and they feel more stressed and less productive than their more senior colleagues.

While some of this is no doubt a temporary reaction to the myriad stresses associated with the pandemic, the data suggests that several factors driving middle managers' increased stress levels and decreased job satisfaction are likely here to stay. Specifically, as organizations shift toward a more distributed workforce long-term, the traditional role of a middle manager — monitoring productivity, optimizing individual performance — is becoming increasingly redundant in three key ways:

1. **The conventional 9-to-5 model is growing obsolete.** In the past, the default 9-to-5 in-person working model meant that managers could monitor their teams by literally walking about the office and checking in with employees. But the pandemic has demonstrated that flexible, asynchronous work schedules can drive better work-life balance, lower stress levels, and higher

productivity, and so many organizations are permanently shifting away from traditional, 9-to-5 models. In this new reality, managers must still play an essential role in nurturing talent and forging team connection, but the old-fashioned "management by walking around" approach will no longer be effective. Instead, managers are now tasked with intentionally designing operating norms and workflows for their teams that don't depend on synchronous, in-person communication — and this is something that many organizations are underprepared to support.

2. **Digital infrastructure is replacing the physical office.** Much of the traditional role of a middle manager has been to support communication and collaboration for employees that might otherwise struggle to effectively share information. But when that communication moves from a meeting room to a digital channel, it becomes much easier to automate the documentation and sharing of key information and decisions. This dramatically increases transparency, but it also eliminates both the need and effectiveness of many information sharing mechanisms that would otherwise be the purview of middle management.

3. **Measuring output has gotten easier, while building shared purpose has gotten harder.** With a distributed workforce, holding a team together — that is, building and maintaining strong social ties, forging alignment around a singular mission and vision — is more challenging than ever. The ability to communicate clearly and rally teams remotely has become critical. At the same time, the shift to digital tools has dramatically simplified the process of tracking and measuring output. These tandem shifts mean that the traditional management approach of "command and control" is unnecessary, and in many cases, counterproductive.

From Routers to Leaders

The good news is, middle managers still have a key role to play — that role just needs to evolve. For decades, middle managers have been human routers: tracking project status, moving information across teams, and serving as intermediaries between junior employees and senior leaders. In a remote work context, this communication is harder than ever, but the tactics that will be most effective in managing it have changed.

Rather than manually routing information, managers should identify and implement digital tools that can automate and complement human efforts. One of the top stressors cited in our research was "time spent tracking others' workloads." Managers will be both more effective and less stressed if they leverage tools optimized for tracking remote and hybrid workforces, and then focus their own energy on building teams and developing talent.

This change requires middle managers and executives alike to loosen their grip on the flow of information, embracing a *default-to-open* culture that doesn't require the middle manager to decide what information should be shared across teams. Managers will need to become comfortable with greater scrutiny and day-to-day

accountability from their employees, but in return, employees will be empowered with the context they need to stay aligned and make quicker and better decisions.

Management Shouldn't Be the Only Way to Advance

Of course, middle managers don't exist in a vacuum. To set managers up for success, organizations need to rethink who becomes a middle manager in the first place, and what career development overall will look like in a digital-first environment.

In many organizations, the only way for individual contributors to advance is by becoming managers. This results in a large cohort of middle managers, many of whom have no real desire to lead. It also means that limited training resources must be shared among this large group of all employees who wish to advance their careers, regardless of whether they are qualified or even interested in becoming the types of managers that their organizations really need.

To address this, organizations need to take a two-pronged approach: First, as "routing" tasks become largely automated, middle managers should be empowered to focus on the vital work of forging connections, building belonging among diverse employees, and developing talent. This means investing in training for communication skills, inclusion techniques, and coaching. This also means reducing the total number of middle managers, so that resources can be focused on supporting a smaller group of dedicated leaders.

Second, companies need to build career ladders that allow expert individual contributors to grow in title and compensation based on demonstrated expertise and outcomes, *without* requiring them to become managers. Many people are ambitious, but not particularly interested in managing people. Providing these employees with a compelling development track will be essential both for their own growth and job satisfaction, and to ensure that those who do become middle managers actually want to do the work involved.

For example, Slack has defined two equally important leadership tracks: an expert track and a team development track. Through the expert track, individual contributors can be promoted up to the VP level based on their technical mastery alone. There is no expectation that they need to shift their focus to managing people, team development, or reporting on OKRs. On the other hand, the team development track is for people who both show a mastery of technical functions such as engineering, but also demonstrate an interest and competency in the essence of management: creating clarity in the mission and goals of the team, removing obstacles and aligning resources, and coaching and developing individuals.

Too often, middle managers are used to paper over broken business processes, with key tasks dependent on individuals' institutional memory rather than sustainable procedures. Fixing

these process gaps depends on embracing digital tools so that the humans in the loop can focus on what they do best — whether that's technical expertise or people management.

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There is an entire canon of research dedicated to solving the riddle of the middle manager. This publication alone has run everything from "In Praise of Middle Managers," to "Why Being a Middle Manager Is So Exhausting," to "The End of the Middle Manager." The rapid shift to distributed work over the last year has only expanded the challenges facing the modern middle manager — but it has also created an unparalleled opportunity to rethink the role of management for a new, digital-first world.

As digital tools enable the freer, more democratic flow of information, there will no longer be any need for managers whose sole job is to route information between the top and bottom of the company. Instead of being stuck in the middle, managers will be free to focus on something that is infinitely more important: building and connecting the people that are the true lifeblood of any organization.

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Brian Elliott is the Executive Lead of the Future Forum, a consortium launched by Slack to help companies reimagine work in the new digital-first world. Founding partners include the Boston Consulting Group, Herman Miller, and MLT. Before launching the Future Forum, Brian was the VP & General Manager of Platform at Slack, where he oversaw Platform strategy and execution.

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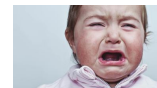
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