

## Being a Mid-Career Academic: Challenges, Rewards, and Reflections

Khuzaima Daudjee

Cheriton School of Computer Science, University of Waterloo, Canada

Reaching mid-career can feel like walking into a meeting where everyone assumes you're chairing, and you don't know that. You then realize that the role you hold in the room has changed, even if you don't feel particularly different. You've earned tenure, your name starts appearing on committees, and people have started asking you for advice as though you know what you're doing. The expectations change from proving you belong to more about deciding what kind of scholar, mentor, and community member you want to be. It is a stage in one's career that usually comes with more autonomy, more responsibility, and perhaps the realization that no one is keeping score except you.

Offering advice here feels a little presumptuous. I don't claim to have great wisdom; just experience, a few lessons learned and plenty still in progress. And because my research background is systems-oriented, my perspective leans toward building stuff and practice, and the belief that many things are clearer once you've built something. Hopefully, some of what I will say next will be useful; ignore what isn't, and feel free to smile politely while doing so (quiet eye-rolling is also acceptable).

Mid-career brings a small but important pause. You start noticing what kind of work you may be proud of, what kind you don't want to repeat, and where you actually want to spend your time. You also realize that no one is steering your trajectory except you, which is both freeing and mildly unsettling.

Much thoughtful advice has already been offered by colleagues on navigating the mid-career stage, so rather than creating a list of recommendations, I'll focus my reflections around four themes from my own experiences. I hope that some of these reflections would be a useful read also for colleagues who are earlier in their careers.

### System Building

Let's talk about two flavours of systems. Assume a strong desire to make systems do something they currently don't do well, or should be able to do, given the resources available. For example, some of my work

has focused on making systems more adaptive. What do I mean by adaptive? We've long asked two related questions: given a workload, how should system resources be managed? And given system resources, how should we handle workloads? These two intertwined questions suggest that the system itself should learn about a workload as it runs, inferring resource needs on the fly and dynamically adjusting allocation and utilization. This line of thinking has opened up an interesting set of problems for me: from monitoring, modeling, control, and systems architecture.

Another approach is to observe real systems in actual use and ask: wouldn't it be great if this system could do X instead of Y, or X in addition to Y? Consequently, the challenge becomes building the new capability in a way that is principled, robust and well-integrated. Underlying both approaches is a commitment to first-principles system design: identify the bottlenecks, reason about their causes, and then design mechanisms that address them in a generalizable way. A principled system doesn't just work -- it works for the right reasons.

This mindset opens choice in research directions not only because they are 'safe' or acceptable to the community but because they represent problems that we believe matter. The freedom afforded by being mid-career allows for pursuing bolder ideas -- problems that may not have obvious benchmarks, baselines or guaranteed outcomes but that have the potential to redefine how systems work. These are often higher-risk directions, but they can be those that lead to significant insight and impact. At this career stage, it is justifiable to trust one's own thoughts of what is important and to build systems you want the world to have, rather than only ones that fit into established categories.

### Mentorship

Mentorship is often mentioned in the context of early-career researchers, but it remains just as important at the mid-career stage. Mid-career, the challenges shift. Instead of narrowly focusing on generating publishable results, researchers are often in the phase of making

decisions that define their long-term research agenda and leadership roles. These decisions are harder and generally less structured. A senior mentor can provide an outsider's perspective when considering new research directions, deciding whether to take on administrative responsibilities, joining major grant proposals, or dealing with institutional issues. Mentorship at this stage is less about how to succeed day-to-day and more about how to steer: how to choose the kind of researcher, advisor, and contributor you would like to be over the next decade.

What makes a good senior mentor? Trust and candor. A senior mentor should be someone whose judgment you respect and whose values you can relate to, someone you feel comfortable asking anything, from questions about research directions to sensitive questions about conflict, opportunity, or burnout. Importantly, a good mentor is not someone who simply agrees with you: they challenge your viewpoint and may offer advice you don't necessarily want to hear, but that can help you to see and understand your situation more clearly. The value lies not only in the guidance, but also in the advice that can bring about re-prioritization or a change in perspective. Mid-career mentorship works best when it is grounded in openness and a willingness to consider discomfort as a signal of growth and not of failure.

### **Micro-Visits**

Short, focused, research visits of one to three weeks can be an effective way to establish potential longer-term collaborations. Unlike a sabbatical, they require relatively less work to set up and can be scheduled around teaching or administrative responsibilities. The value of a micro-visit comes from time spent working together with colleagues and their students. These interactions can help to assimilate things that e-mail, Zoom, or even co-authoring a paper cannot: how people think, make decisions, and conduct research. A micro-visit can help gauge whether there are genuine shared interests and an intellectual fit. When these align, micro-visits can naturally scale up into co-advised students, shared grants, multi-year projects, and so on, leading to long-term collaborations built on mutual understanding.

### **Service**

Service often becomes distinctive at the mid-career stage. Roles such as journal associate editorships,

chairing PCs and organizing workshops stop being "extra" and become part of how we help set the tone for the field. What I've appreciated in these roles is the chance to work with colleagues whose judgment you come to trust. For example, putting together a call for papers and deciding what kind of work we want to encourage becomes, in some small way, a shared research conversation. These collaborations are often where one can learn quite a bit about how others put value on a piece of work, and how they balance openness with focus.

On the practical side, almost nothing is ever smooth sailing. Deadlines can slip, and reviews can go missing. Sometimes, we need to mediate tensions and deal with unbalanced workloads. There's no glamour in chasing late reviewers or dealing with difficult cases, but it is part of the job. What has helped me is watching how more experienced colleagues handle these issues, how they keep things moving without making them personal, how they simplify processes to avoid recurring pain points, and how they maintain fairness when there isn't a perfect answer. A key aspect of service is about learning how to work with others when things are not perfect.

### **Summary**

Mid-career is less about checking boxes and more about direction. It is a period where uncertainty and freedom can co-exist, where the work becomes driven less by external expectations and more by what feels meaningful and interesting. It offers an opportunity to think and consider not just what we can do, but what we want to do, and how we want to show up for our colleagues, collaborators, and students. As you shape this next phase of your career, don't sacrifice the parts of life that make the work worth doing: your relationships, your health, your interests, and the things that matter to you. A career is not only what we build in papers and systems. It is also what we build in ourselves along the way.