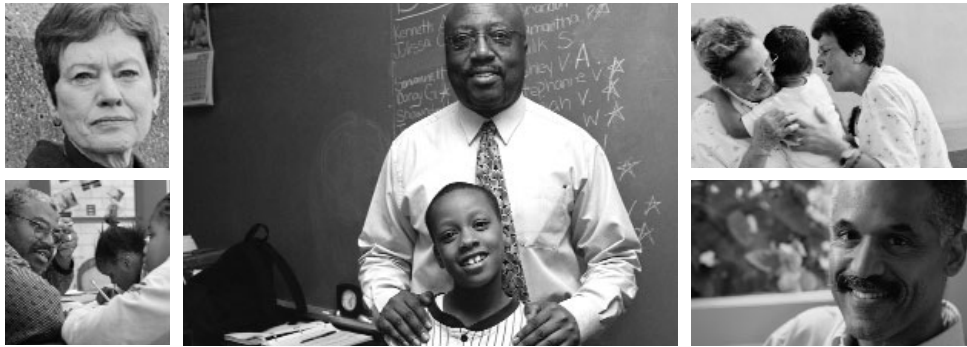


The boomers, good work, and the next stage of life

An essay by Marc Freedman

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A succession of surveys over the past decade makes plain the plans of a new generation of older Americans to keep working. Most of this research reveals that four of five boomers are expecting to continue working at the point when earlier generations moved to the sidelines. Indeed, there is already evidence of shifting labor patterns on the part of the pre-boomers, as early retirement levels off and millions of older workers remain in the workforce. These polls also find that most people who keep working want more than an endless incarnation of midlife work. Instead, they are keen on renegotiating their relationship to work, looking for more flexibility and liberation from the long hours characterizing midlife labor in America today.

The MetLife Foundation/Civic Ventures *New Face of Work Survey* breaks important new ground, moving beyond the research to date by focusing on a set of central questions that have been little explored: What kind of work does the current and coming generation of Americans in their 50s and 60s actually want to do? What are these individuals looking to accomplish through work after the traditional working years? Do these priorities fit with where we are likely to need people? Or is there a great disjuncture between what the new generation of aging workers want and what the economy—and society—need?

The findings constitute the first in-depth look at the pre-boomers and leading-edge boomers' priorities for the next stage of work, and offer heartening indications of what might well be a win-win opportunity of staggering proportions.

In analyzing this research, we see 10 critical trends:

1 The freedom to work. The pre-boomers and leading-edge boomers surveyed are poised to swap the old dream of the freedom *from* work for one that might be characterized as the freedom *to* work. When asked about whether this is a time to take a well-deserved rest or an opportunity to begin a new chapter characterized by making important contributions, they break with earlier generations in embracing engagement. And most are planning to do so through continued work: A full 65 percent of leading-edge boomers say work will continue to be a part of their life throughout what used to be the retirement years. These individuals appear to be inventing not only a new stage of life between the middle years and true old age, but a new stage of work.

2 Doing well by doing good. The desire to do work that enhances the well-being of others is widespread. Fully half of all adults age 50 to 70 (and 58% of those 50 to 59) aspire to work in seven areas that combine the seriousness, income, and other benefits associated with work with the desire to contribute to the greater good. Indeed, when asked specifically to name the kind of work they would prefer to do in the future, those surveyed named education and social services as two of their three top choices. Both finished just behind retail work—an area where much recruitment of aging Americans is underway. Health care jobs also finish high on the priority list.

3 The great connect. The widespread desire to do good work is enormously heartening news, indicating a good fit between the desires of a new generation of older Americans and some of the key sectors—education, health care, and social services—where we are wringing our hands wondering how to find the talent to fill growing human resource gaps. What’s even more encouraging is that this desire appears not only to run wide, but *deep*: More than one in five leading-edge boomers (21%) surveyed say they have a very strong interest in pursuing these options.

4 Beyond volunteering. Much debate over the social contribution of the boomers in their next stage has hinged on whether they will volunteer at levels comparable to their predecessors, most notably the greatest generation. There’s reason for concern, given the boomers’ mixed performance as joiners and volunteers during the middle years. But this survey suggests that when all is said and done, work that is not only personally meaningful but that means something important in service to the wider community may be the most important way that boomers choose to give back.

5 Beyond the retail model. If the old norm for retirement was the golden years focused on leisure, the new default position seems to be a part-time job in the retail sector. Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and others deserve considerable credit for recognizing this pool of talent and for actively recruiting a population most employers overlook. But survey findings show that a significant segment of Americans moving toward their 60s and 70s wants something distinct from a retail or fast-food work experience. They want to focus their accumulated time, talent, and experience on work that directly contributes to social renewal. Their disposition is a powerful reminder that we will need to do a much better job of opening up opportunities in the realm of good work—in education, health care, the social sector, among others—if we are to have any hope of fully capturing the potential contributions of this experience-rich generation.

6 A new career arc. It has become commonplace to think about retirement jobs as part-time employment, bridging the gap between midlife work and later-life leisure—the work one does *after* the major body of work is over. As respondents to this survey emphasize, many leading-edge boomers are instead envisioning something that resembles a second *half* of work. Given that they want to shift toward good work now, not when they're 65, they'll have 10 or even 20 years to put into this second career. That makes the prospect of additional education and retraining more appealing for these individuals—as they would be investing in a new stage of work. It also creates a more viable arrangement for potential employers, who would see that those over 50 aren't likely to be simply passing through on their way to retirement. While this second half of work might not be as long in duration as the first half, in the end, it might well weigh as much, producing a body of work equal in significance.

7 Not fading away. Running throughout these findings is a vision of the post-midlife years that is inimical to the notion of decline, whether that be the precipitous cliff of complete disengagement or the more prevalent notion these days of pulling back gradually but steadily, or phasing out. While those surveyed show strong interest in getting a better balance between work and life, shining through is a vision for work that suggests people believe some of their most important contributions may well lie ahead. In some ways, the patron saint here is Jimmy Carter, for whom the apex of midlife achievement, the presidency of the United States, was in many ways a prelude to the work we'll remember him for, and for which he's achieved his greatest recognition.

8 The pull of people and purpose. For all its uplifting qualities, simply knowing that there is wide and deep interest in good work is inadequate. The question “why” looms large. This new research reaffirms that additional income and a sense of idealism are important components of the drive toward good work, but perhaps even more important are *people and purpose*—the connections to others committed to similar goals, and a reason to get up in the morning. For a generation that derived a great deal of its identity and social networks from work—sociologist Arlie Hochschild argues that for this group in midlife, work became a refuge—these aspirations for the second half of work should come as no surprise.

9 All dressed up, but where to go? Despite strong interest in pursuing new work for the greater good, few of those surveyed thought it would be very easy to find this type of engagement. Their response was striking given the good potential fit between supply and demand in areas such as education and health care. Their answers suggest a pair of barriers: 1) We do a much better job helping people plan financially for the second half of life than we do helping them navigate their way from one phase of life and work to engagement in another. 2) There is as yet little evidence of receptivity by the nonprofit sector in tapping this coming population of aging boomers and pre-boomers. Indeed, a new study by the National Council on the Aging shows that indifference toward the contribution of this group is often the prevailing perspective of these organizations.

10 The second coming of barrier-busters. As this last point underscores, the drive toward good work comes largely from the people themselves—not the organizations that might use their time, talents, and experience. This drive contains many of the features of a social movement—and in many ways it resembles the women’s movement during the 1960s. There were few supportive policies, nor much impetus from employers at that juncture. All the dynamism came from the individuals themselves. It should be little surprise then that this survey reveals that the groups most ready to be pioneers in this new generation are none other than the boomer women and African Americans who broke down so many barriers earlier in their lives.

These survey results hold enormous allure—suggesting that, despite many challenges, the new demographics and the trend toward longer working lives contain the potential for both social and individual benefit.

Never before have so many Americans had so much experience—and so much time to do something with it. Will our society make the most of this potential windfall, recapturing years of investment in human and social capital and helping direct these human resources in ways that promise the greatest return for individuals and the nation? Or will we write off what may be our only increasing asset, the experience of a generation of Americans soon to represent nearly a quarter of the population?

Realizing the experience dividend will be neither easy nor automatic. Rather, it will require renewed creativity at all levels—new perspectives, new policies, new pathways, and most of all new opportunities to put to good use what individuals have learned through life. That can sound like a tall order, but then again, the history of aging in America is a history of spectacular innovation.

It must continue to be.

The payoff is nothing less than a society that makes sense, one that balances the joys and responsibility of engagement throughout the lifespan and across the generations. In other words, one that works better for everybody. ■