

Leading in Mid-Life: Nonprofit Careers for Older Workers

The desire to contribute has no age limit. Examples of men and women creating social impact span the generations, and we can expect to see even more as a new generation of older Americans – the “baby boomers” – seeks to be engaged in meaningful roles past the point where their parents and other elders simply moved to the sidelines.

According to a new study from the MetLife Foundation and Civic Ventures, a full 65 percent of baby boomers say work will continue to be a part of their life throughout what used to be the retirement years. What’s more, fully half of those polled in the “New Face of Work Survey” aspire to work in areas that combine the “seriousness, income and other benefits associated with work with the desire to contribute to the greater good.”

These trends portend well for several nonprofit domains where there are shortages of experienced people to fill required roles. Nevertheless, having the ability to embrace and assimilate this talent pool will require understanding and compromise on each side – employers and employees. Leadership Matters talked with Marc Freedman, president of Civic Ventures, to learn more.

Bridgestar: First tell us about Civic Ventures.

Marc Freedman: Civic Ventures is a nonprofit organization dedicated to cultivating attitudes, creating programs, and developing policies that help society achieve the greatest return on experience. In a nutshell, we believe that it is critical to retain the pool of social and human capital that’s accumulated over time in a new generation now moving toward their 60s and 70s— especially those individuals interested in contributing to the greater good.

For example: the first baby boomers – the leading edge of that vast cohort born between 1946 and 1964 – will turn 60 less than six months from now. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush will each turn 60 next year, within six weeks of each other. Not long ago, 60 was considered “old;” by the time you hit 60 you were considered a senior citizen – and many employers mandated retirement at 65. Today, according to one study, Americans at this stage feel an estimated 19 years younger than their chronological age. To be sure, some still want to retire for good as they approach 60 or 65. Others long to take a break, to catch their breath after the many hours of midlife overwork. But an increasing number are soon restless, ready to launch the next chapter of their contributing lives. That’s good news, because they constitute not only the largest, healthiest and most vigorous population of Americans ever to reach their 60s – but also the best educated. We couldn’t build enough campuses for them when they were starting out. Making it possible for this population to remain engaged and contributing amounts to a potential win-win opportunity of staggering proportions.

It sounds like you are suggesting something beyond volunteer work.

MF: Over the past four or five decades the norm for retirement was the “golden years,” an extended vacation focused on leisure and perhaps some volunteer work. Since the 1960s we’ve witnessed a proliferation of senior volunteer opportunities. Some of them are substantial, really drawing on the talent present in this population. But many do not begin to take advantage of their skills and abilities. Fortune® Magazine captured the growing mismatch between an aging population that wants more than stuffing envelopes in an article entitled “Candy Striper My Ass.”

Now, the pre-boomers and leading edge boomers are poised to invent a new stage of life. This amounts to a once-a-century development. We didn’t have adolescents before the early decades of the last century. And, what’s becoming clear is that this time we are also investing a new stage of work. Indeed, this transformation is already underway, especially in certain



sectors of the economy. There are a number of retailers and service firms that have adroitly recognized the pool of talent in mid-life and older people, and they are in the midst of actively recruiting from among their ranks to fill essential vacancies in their workforces. McDonald's, Wal-Mart and Home Depot come to mind. AARP recently forged a partnership with 13 such firms to help them recruit AARP'S members.

However, our newest survey, "The New Face of Work," conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International with funding from the MetLife Foundation, suggests that a significant segment of Americans moving toward their 60s and 70s wants something else out of work. They want to focus their accumulated time, talent and experience on issues and organizations that directly contribute to social renewal.

Can you summarize the results of the survey for our readers?

MF: We started with the premise that the baby boom generation has the potential to redefine retirement and, in so doing, to redefine work for its own and for forthcoming generations. Survey after survey has already made plain that the boomers are going to keep working, and we now possess a great deal of research that shows they are looking to renegotiate their relationship with work to wrest additional flexibility, freedom and balance.

Now, what kind of work does this generation want to do? What are they looking to accomplish through work? Do these priorities mesh with where we are likely to need people, or are we careening towards a great disjuncture between what millions want to do and what the economy – society – needs?

I think the most significant finding is that there is the potential for a very good fit between their work dreams and the emerging human resource needs in education, health care, human services, and the nonprofit sector more broadly. Fully half of those surveyed say they are interested in taking jobs to help improve the quality of life in their communities. A little over 20 percent of the leading edge boomers say they're intensely interested in moving in this direction. They're ready to make the jump now, to bridge toward what might be seen as the second half of work, launching a body of work that might not be as long as their first or even second career, but that has the potential to be as significant.

Why do people want to work now?

MF: Some of the reason is idealism. This is, after all, the "Ask Not" generation – remember those photos of Clinton with JFK. For about half it's a question of economic necessity. But we were struck by that power of two more immediate objectives: people and purpose. Fifty-nine percent say that staying involved with other people is very important in attracting them to work in retirement. Roughly the same percentage says that they want to maintain a sense of purpose, to have a reason to get up in the morning. When asked to name the kind of work they'd like to do – an open-ended question – eight percent responded that they want to work in education and another eight percent want to work in social services, while 10 percent mention retail. So two of the top three categories fit into the arena of what we're calling "good work."

What about volunteering?

MF: The "Greatest Generation," those born from 1911 through the mid 1920s, placed a high value and priority on volunteering – and also on retirement. There is some reason to believe that boomers may not volunteer at the same levels, considering their mixed performance in this realm during the middle years. The survey suggests that in measuring their civic engagement and social contribution we might well break free from using the yardstick of previous generations. I suspect that when all is said and done, the civic legacy the boomers will leave from this stage of life will be in the realm of work, combining the need for continued income and health benefits, and the structure and connection work provides, with a powerful desire to contribute to the wellbeing of others. If we let them.

Sounds like a challenge for the sector.

MF: Only 12 percent felt it would be very easy to apply these priorities and find good work, even where there are gaping needs for teachers, nurses, child care workers and others.

Why would it be difficult for this group to find opportunities, if the pool of talent is so essential?

MF: Well, there are a number of reasons. Part of the problem is that we still harbor a lot of misconceptions about what constitutes “old.” The vast majority of the population leaving the middle years is neither young nor old. They are looking at two or three decades of likely wellbeing before resembling the senior citizens of previous generations.

Some will need and want flexibility in their schedules, and organizations tend to be better set up to accommodate full-time workers—or traditional volunteers. Certain laws and policies tend to hamper work in retirement, and those we polled were very aware of this. Also, some prospective workers, while quite eager to contribute, need training to prepare for work in, say, schools or social services. Over all, as many as 60% support tax credits for older Americans who work in these areas. Almost half strongly support increasing funding for education and training. And these numbers cut across party lines and ideological leanings.

That raises an interesting point. What about people who have been working in a particular organization, or field, and are at about the age of retirement – but want to continue working in the manner you suggest? I am thinking especially of leaders of organizations. Can we really afford to overlook their expertise?

MF: That’s a rhetorical question, isn’t it?

We can’t afford it as a society – we can’t afford to squander the enormous investment we made in developing this pool of human talent. And they can’t afford it financially, psychologically, even in terms of health. There is now a burgeoning body of research showing powerful links between continued work and sustained physical and mental health.

What’s more, I believe that this post-middle period is when many people will do their most significant work. Perhaps they won’t spend as many hours per week at work, but with certain burdens lifted they may truly have a second chance to think about what they do, and about how to do it better – in some cases to apply what they’ve learned from life to help solve important social problems.

If supported, this amounts to a breathtaking opportunity for the nonprofit sector, and for everyone that the sector ultimately serves. But this happy ending won’t happen easily or automatically, at least not at scale. And it is not just about bringing new people into the sector. The question of how we can retain the vast reservoir of experience already present in nonprofit leaders in their 50s and 60s is just as important.

In my experience, many of these people need to take a break first, some time focused on renewal – whether it’s for education, travel, connecting with friends and family, or pursuing outside interests long neglected through those 15 hour days. But when that time is over, many struggle to regain their footing. We’re missing the pathways to make re-entry as easy as it should be. As a result there is a lot of anxiety, and much spinning of wheels. Some, unable to find meaningful roles, head off and create their own organizations. Some of these new organizations do extraordinarily valuable work, but others feed overgrowth in the sector. Effectiveness, not overgrowth, is what we need.



For nonprofits, the opportunity is bounded by a challenge. There is an incredible reservoir of expertise in prospective 60/70-something "bridgers." If we don't embrace this group, reach out to them, construct better routes into significant new roles, other sectors will. They're already doing it. Will we muster the ingenuity to make the most of this opportunity, to realize what could well be a social windfall?

What specifically can be done?

MF: As with almost everything, awareness is the first step. And I think David [David Simms, Bridgestar Managing Partner] said it well in his commentary: we have to be sensitive to the needs on both sides, employees and employers. We will need to be open to the idea of redefining work, and how people work.

We're still searching for the breakthrough institution, the one that opens up the entire market, much as Elderhostel helped to create the field of lifelong learning in the 1970s. For example, I believe that great promise exists in a new mechanism helping to bring together the older skilled professionals in functional areas like human resources, marketing and law, on a flexible and part-time basis, with small to medium-sized nonprofits that can't afford fulltime, high cost expertise in these areas. I believe that many nonprofits would pay for this capacity if it was available and affordable, and many professionals moving out of their midlife careers would trade some salary for increased flexibility and the chance to do work that is not only meaningful, but that means something beyond the self.

We need to embark on a whole new era of innovation in this arena. Then again, the history of aging in America is a history of quite spectacular innovation. We didn't even have senior centers or retirement communities 50 years ago. Let it happen again!