

# THE NEW Elderhood

BY STEVEN DAHLBERG

Many changes in the corporate world have impacted the quality of life of people who are nearing retirement age. When those 50-plus began their careers, they often expected to work for one organization for 40 years, then retire (and stop working) at a set age and receive a pension. But the rules have changed and these workers are facing very different work and post-work lives.

People who make up today's workforce are working longer and living longer (up to 20 to 25 years beyond traditional retirement age). There are 77 million baby boomers in the U.S. workforce, and one turns 50 every seven seconds. In fact, a recent report from the Society for Human Resource Management showed that the number of workers age 55 and over is expected to increase by 47 percent over the next seven years, and nearly two-thirds of workforce professionals say they are preparing for this demographic change. As a result, governments, agencies, academics, corporations—and employees themselves—are starting to focus more on issues of vital aging, quality of life, well-being and lifelong learning.

Employment is a source of well-being for many, tied up in the meaning and identity that people gain from their job and co-workers. When leaving this behind, some may experience a decline in their well-being as they face a new schedule, a new social network and a new personal identity.

Now is the time for those age 50-plus to develop a new concept for growing older and working older—and this process can begin in the workplace, according to Richard Leider, a career coach and researcher based in Minneapolis. "Why do you have to leave the workplace to think

about growing yourself and finding purpose?" Leider asks. "Especially as you near the end of your full-time working career."

Most people never fully prepare for this abrupt change. Organizations do not help them. Employees and employers generally do not consider retirement life-planning as an extension of career development. But as baby boomers approach retirement age, one way to improve their well-being and productivity is to help them become new elders. Corporations could provide work-life programs that teach employees how to discover meaning and purpose in both their work and non-work lives.

Corporate leadership will need to address questions like: Why would that individual want to work with our company at this stage in her life? How will our company engage the older worker's heart and mind in purposeful work? In what ways might we connect our company's purpose to the older worker's purpose? What kind of flexible schedules and options can our company offer to workers of all ages?

Nothing is going to drive home the impact of aging workers more than when that knowledge starts walking out the door en masse. Jeff Taylor, the founder of the online job site Monster, was recently quoted as saying, "We'll be facing the worst labor shortage in our lifetime within the

next five years." If he's right, companies are going to have to focus on attracting, recruiting and retaining older workers.

Issues like this emphasize the value of truly embracing an approach to knowledge management that goes far beyond the collection of data. It means figuring out how to truly capture and pass on stories, how to keep older workers meaningfully engaged in the workplace and how to balance the new work-life options that baby boomers are demanding.

## The Real Meaning Of Retirement

Retirement is so often defined negatively and individualistically, as the end of a career and the cessation of work. However, retirement, like most transitions, can also be a creative time—a period of renewal and rejuvenation.

Business philosopher Charles Handy recently declared that the word "retirement" should be banned because "retirement is death." As workers age 50 and older reach the traditional retirement age, that idea of retirement just doesn't work.

Case in point: Roy Reynolds. At 70, he has already retired twice—from the same company. And he's still with Halliburton, an oil and gas industry contractor based in Houston. As a global instructor/con-

sultant, he trains customers and staff about oil drilling. When we caught up with him at Gatwick Airport, he was on his way home to Kansas. He had just spent several days in London training five Halliburton customers from China.

Considering that Reynolds typically travels 15 weeks per year for Halliburton, it's hard to use the word "retirement" to describe his life. Nor does he consider himself retired. "Maybe semi-retired," he said, struggling for a better term.

But that still doesn't really seem to fit, given Reynolds' gardening habit. This year, in addition to onions and two kinds of potatoes, he produced 2,500 pounds of tomatoes that he sold to three grocery stores, a truck stop and a beauty salon. This isn't exactly just a hobby to keep him busy. "That was hard work," Reynolds said. "Harder than working for Halliburton." He also builds furniture in his small wood-working shop.

Why does he maintain this blended lifestyle of working, hobbies and family? "It keeps me younger," he says. "I never plan to retire."

Reynolds is far from alone in his approach to aging. Many others have suggested new ways of thinking about later-life vitality, engagement and retirement, and Leider is one of them. He's been studying, training and coaching people about careers and purpose for more than 30 years. In *Repacking Your Bags* (Berrett-Koehler, 1995), Leider defined how to have a good life: Live in the place you belong, with people you love, doing the right work, on purpose.

Now he suggests that the second half of life offers new possibilities for a full life—revisiting our callings, recommitting to our purposes, living creatively, and becoming "new elders" of our tribes.

## Thinking Differently

Elders? Tribes? Yes. Leider's concept of the new elder—though it generally bears a relationship to getting older—has far more to do with having a certain mindset than being a certain

physical age. His journey to this idea began several years ago in Tanzania. At an evening campfire during one of Leider's annual walking safaris, an elder from the Hadza tribe named Maroba asked him: "Who are the elders of your tribe?"

"I could not answer that question," says Leider. "I drew a complete blank. In the context of our current Western lives, I wondered, what's an elder?" For an answer, Leider reflected upon two aspects of his own experience: guiding people through the questions of career and interviewing hundreds of older people about their regrets. The most frequently expressed regrets centered on the topic of authenticity. "Nearly everyone wished they had taken more chances to be themselves, to be free," he says. "Furthermore, nearly all these people realized that their greatest obstacle was their own nature, the limitations they themselves had created."

Leider realized that for traditional peoples like the Hadza, the campfire provides a way of relating to each other and to the world. Around that fire, tribal members both contribute their experience and

learn from the wisdom of others. Through that process, they find their voice and claim their right to speak. Around that fire, they were living the good life.

"At all stages in our lives, we can continue to craft and live our own individual and true vision of the good life," says Leider. This process can begin within the tribe of our family, workplace or community—and it can link across these tribes.

Next, Leider sought examples of people who are full of a sense of vitality and live purposeful lives. He discovered that "these are the people who use the 'unknown' as an empty canvas, a blank page, a hunk of clay to be formed through ongoing self-expression and growth." They apply creative thinking to overcome the blocks and assumptions that keep them from choosing to live authentically.

Leider cites Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter as very public examples of people who are reclaiming their places as leaders, workers and elders in society. They teach Sunday school, build low-cost homes for Habitat for Humanity and work for reconciliation in fledgling democracies.

"The Carters have claimed their place at the fire," says Leider. "They are putting to use the deep wisdom and purpose they have developed during their long and useful lives."

Individuals preparing to leave their full-time work identity are living the paradox where old and new possibilities exist together simultaneously. This time calls for unlocking radical imagination. "We are living on the boundary between the old and the new possibilities for vital aging," Leider says. "Insights are needed and choices must be made—both personally and organizationally. In finding the freedom to be who we are—without the self-imposed limitations that prevent us from the authentic expression of self—we become the source of wisdom and grace upon which our communities so vitally depend." ■

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### RELATED BOOKS:

*Claiming Your Place at the Fire: Living the Second Half of Your Life on Purpose* by Richard J. Leider and David A. Shapiro (Berrett-Koehler, August 2004)  
*Working Identity: Unconventional Strategies for Reinventing Your Career* by Herminia Ibarra (Harvard Business School Press, 2003)

### RELATED WEB SITES:

[agescan.blogspot.com](http://agescan.blogspot.com) – Steven Dahlberg's "ageing as exile?" blog about creativity, purpose, retirement and aging.  
[www.authentic happiness.org](http://www.authentic happiness.org) – Martin Seligman's "Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology" site, offering several free self-assessments about purpose.