

Boomers Find Retirement Doesn't Work

Whether for Love or Money, They'll Stay on the Job or Find New Ones

By Kathleen O'Brien
Star-Ledger Staff
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On the pension rolls, Alan Pressman is retired.

In real life, he's still working his tail off as the director of a bustling private summer day camp for more than 400 kids.

"I love working with children, and that has kept me absolutely young. It gives me a purpose in life," he said.

Even though the former guidance counselor from Montville will turn 60 in October, he has no notion of when he might work completely. "I don't have a timetable," he says.

As the oldest Baby Boomers hit 60 this year, one might anticipate an upcoming stampede out the company door.

But don't order that sheet cake for the retirement party just yet. Boomers aren't likely to retire in the same manner – or on the same schedule - as previous generations. For many reasons, experts say, they intend to hang around the job

"This generation's different across the board. They've always molded society to fit them, and the same thing is happening with the workplace," said Laurel Kennedy, of Age Lessons, a Chicago Boomer consultant.

An AARP survey found that more than two-thirds of workers 45 to 74 plan to work in some capacity past retirement. Even AARP - the "R" stands for "retirement" - now calls this stage "so-called retirement."

The average retirement age today is 63, while the official age for collecting full Social Security benefits is 66 for those born between 1943 and 1954.

Why will boomers remain yoked to the plow at a point in their lives when their parents would have been golfing? Will they work because they want to - or because they have to?

Marie Kennedy qualifies for a monthly pension of just \$98 from the former St. Vincent's Hospital in her native Montclair, where she worked as a nurse for 15 years before moving to a series of jobs in the health field. The amount is so small it makes her laugh. "Doncha love it?" she said.

Economic necessity will keep her at their latest career in commercial and industrial real estate for now. Talk to her at length and it becomes clear her retirement timetable is ruled not just by her checkbook, but by her heart as well.

"I need a purpose - something to sink my teeth into," said Kennedy, who turns 60 in November. "There isn't this overwhelming need for me to retire."

NOT JUST FOR THE MONEY

Boomers can keep their noses to the grindstone in part because many jobs are now less physically arduous. While their parents might have yearned for retirement from back-breaking factory jobs at 60, boomers are more likely to have jobs requiring nothing more grueling than e-mailing a spreadsheet.

Some will need to keep working because downsizing - particularly in New Jersey's telecommunications industry - derailed

plans to sock away retirement savings.

They also worry about Social Security. Retiring early, with partial benefits, could cause problems later, given increased life expectancy. If they want to maintain their current standard of living, they would have to work between two and 3 _ years beyond the average retirement age of 63, according to an analysis called "Will We Have to Work Forever?" by the Center for Retirement Research at Boston College.

Add to that the stock market downturn of 2000-2001, which put a dent in boomer nest eggs just as they were supposed to be reaping the rewards of long-term investment, and work starts to look even more appealing.

"They say, 'I was thinking of retiring in two years, and now I think I won't retire until I'm 75,'" said Barbara Davis, who owns a job-placement agency in Red Bank and specializes in training and placing boomers.

Yet when asked what will keep them in the work force, "money" wasn't the main motivation reported in a 2006 Merrill Lynch survey of boomers. The more common reasons cited by those closest to the traditional retirement age were that work "will keep me mentally active," (66 percent) and "will keep me physically active" (54 percent). Money came in third, cited by 49 percent.

For many companies, these attitudes are welcome, because retirement on a traditional schedule could result in a national shortage of 11 million workers.

On paper, there would seem to be a perfect match: Boomers want to keep working, and employers need them.

In the real world, however employers are ill-prepared to make the best use of this resource, said Laurel Kennedy, the Chicago workplace consultant. Many haven't even completed a rudimentary survey to find out what jobs will open. They remain blind to the possibility that the boomers approaching retirement age might want to stay.

"Some of it's sheer ageism. They think, 'They're over 50. They're old. They're just marking time until retirement. don't want to learn anything new,'" she said.

Add to that the myth that older employees cost more - in both salary and health benefits - and there is reluctance to consider retaining veteran workers. (This despite a study determining they cost at most 3 percent more than new workers, once hiring and training costs have been included).

WEALTH OF EXPERIENCE

Too bad, says Kennedy. Older workers consistently score higher on the interpersonal skills that are at the heart of customer relations, and while they have more health problems, they have less absenteeism.

The generation that has been tagged with a reputation for self-involvement is actually quite hard-working.

"They have a great work ethic," said temp agency owner Davis. "Very rarely do we have to worry about their showing up on t

"They're not burned out on the company," Kennedy said of older workers. "It's the company that is burned out on t

Companies that view older workers as deadwood might want to find ways to remain attractive to them, given their growing numbers, she said.

The 55-and-older category of employees is growing at four times the rate of the overall labor force, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. By the time the oldest boomers hit the conventional retirement age of 65, nearly one out of every five jobs will be held by a worker over 55.

What employers fail to grasp is that these workers want jobs that allow for more flexibility and creativity, studies suggest. In the Merrill Lynch survey, two-thirds wanted to switch to a different line of work.

These answers should be taken with a grain of salt, however. The survey also found that fully a quarter of boomers want to become "consultants." And of those planning a second, post-retirement career, 45 percent had taken no steps whatsoever - no training, no research - to prepare for the imagined switch-over.

Marie Kennedy, the Livingston real estate agent, has crafted the flexibility many boomers seek. Working alongside her husband she can control her schedule to provide time to baby-sit her grandchildren, sing in her church choir and volunteer for the Livingston Symphony Orchestra and Soroptimists International, the women's service organization.

"I consider myself semi retired already. Don't get me wrong: I work and I work hard. But I play and I play hard," she said.

Laurel Kennedy thinks job sharing - invented by boomer women interested in freeing up time for child-care - can be keep older workers on the job, if only part time. Instead of two new parents sharing the hours and benefits of one job a fledgling employee and a veteran boomer could do the sharing. Both generations, noted Kennedy, have told pollsters interested in more flexibility in their work schedules.

Boomers could also serve as mentors to these younger workers, transferring expertise, skills and the vaunted boomer ethic. "Maybe that would rub off," Kennedy said.

NEW TAKES ON FLEX TIME

Employers who recognize that veteran employees may want to cut back often assume the only accommodation would be part-time work. Yet the Merrill Lynch survey showed that workers may prefer seasonal or cyclical work - full-time for weeks or months, followed by a comparable amount of time off. They don't want to be tied down to a rigid schedule, even if it is only part-time.

Pressman, the retired teacher, has ended up with precisely this kind of seasonal job. He works hard during the summer months when camp is in session, but puts in light office duty - at times of his choosing - during the school year.

This gives him time to travel, golf and visit his 96-year-old father, whom he describes as "the mayor of the Daughters of Miriam" referring to the Clifton assisted-living center.

For some workers, pension rules make staying on part-time unattractive, as benefits are based on the annual salary in the year leading up to retirement. These workers may retire from one job only to begin the hunt for a new one.

They often fear they won't be hired because of their age. Some employers do signal a preference for younger workers, using code phrases like, "We want someone with a lot of energy and enthusiasm," said employment agency owner Davis.

But feeling certain that age discrimination will occur can be self-fulfilling, she said. Such an applicant approaches the job interview with a defeatist attitude.

It may be daunting to be interviewed by a human resources person who is years - if not decades - younger, but Davis urges boomers to avoid assuming these younger workers aren't full professionals. As she points out, that would be age discrimination.

And as time moves on, that human resources person might not actually be so young. "The older you get," she said, "the younger everyone else looks."

