

CAREERS

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## 65. And still going.

### Why would anyone want to keep working after they "retire"? For more and more people, the answer is: Why not?

By Mark Pothier | June 1, 2008

Al Almeida retired years ago. He just never stopped working. In 1994, he signed off from a quarter-century career with Raytheon Co. Three jobs later, the 72-year-old roams the aisles at Borders in Kingston, where he has been selling books part time for about six years. The way Almeida sees it, he is doing more than promoting products. "It's important that people here know I'm carrying my share of the load. Unless your job description says 'elder statesman,' forget about it," he says. "Older workers can't feed stereotypes. You know, standing around talking about how good the old times were. Who wants to hear that? You come in and work. And you work hard."

People doing the hiring these days, from retail to healthcare to utilities, are counting on that kind of ethic to spread like a celebrity rumor. They need employees to stay on the payroll past the traditional - and increasingly irrelevant - retirement age of 65. Maybe way past. Academics who burrow into the demographics and trends can rattle off enough statistics to make a sportstrivia junkie woozy, but the numbers can be pared to this: As baby boomers make an exodus from employment ranks over the next two decades, there will not be enough Generation Xers to take their places. Last year, an estimated 61.1 million boomers worked nationwide, compared with 54.7 million from Gen X, according to the Boston College Center on Aging & Work. The employment gap could be gaping in states like Massachusetts - already the 12th oldest in the United States - where population growth has flatlined and shows no signs of reviving. A report by the Center on Aging & Work and AARP estimated that about 40 percent of Massachusetts residents will be at least 50 years old two years from now.

"We're an aging state in an aging nation, and that creates challenges for individuals and organizations," says Michael Smyer, the BC center's co-director. "The term 'older worker' used to lead to discussions about retirement; now it's discussions about retention and engagement." Probably not in the high-paying corporate posts many once held, but on the job somehow, somewhere, in positions that might otherwise go unfilled. Fortunately for human resources managers, most boomers are not ready to slap "Go around me, I'm retired" bumper stickers on their cars. An AARP survey found more than two-thirds plan to keep earning paychecks after crossing the corporate finish line.

Today's workplace blends four generations, roughly broken down this way: Y (born 1981-present), X (1965-1980), baby boomers (1946-1964), and traditionalists (1927-1945). Together, they create a stew that will thicken as boomers stick around and Gen Y employment swells. Few expect the oldest workers to feel shoved toward the door, but such a diverse collection of beliefs, perceptions, and standards is a recipe for culture clashes in hallways and offices.

"There is no one reason" why people are working into their late 60s, 70s, and 80s, Smyer says. "Some have to for health or wealth - they need the income, insurance, or both. Others want to work. People don't go from 60 to zero anymore. They downshift."

And some don't slow down at all. One of the biggest factors is simply that boomers are healthier than earlier generations, allowing them to be productive longer. Smyer calls that "the longevity bonus." Others might view it as a penalty - living longer requires more cash. "It's either exciting or a burden, depending on whether you want to work or have to," he says. "But our whole notion of how age and careers fit together hasn't caught up with what people are doing." Some companies are so fixated on "constant upward mobility" that they cannot relate to employees who have disengaged from the scramble for power and prestige, he says.

In theory, boomers will leverage their blossoming cachet to choose lower-stress jobs that package extra income with a sense of gratification. That is what some in the pre-boomer generation already are doing. Like Tim McCarthy, 67, who stepped down in 2005 as general manager of Belmont's Municipal Light Department, where he had worked since 1959. After retiring, McCarthy decided to attend a job fair at Fenway Park "out of the clear blue" and landed a job checking media credentials. He typically makes \$72 a game. The excitement of being at Fenway counts for more than the money, he says. "I wanted to do something completely different, something where I wasn't in charge. I was determined it would be fun."

To employers, older workers are a cheap investment, especially in retail, where training is relatively minimal. They offer dependability, low turnover, and people skills, at about the same price as a lackadaisical teenager raised on self-service. "Employers say mature workers tend to be more customer focused," says Deborah Russell, director of workforce issues for AARP.

"They are better decision makers," according to Dan Smith, Borders senior vice president of human resources. "The under-30 worker is still in that stage of their life where they're figuring out what they're trying to do." He says the company - which has about 1,100 stores worldwide, including 31 in Massachusetts - has done "a lot of research" on what older workers want. While jobs like Almeida's will not finance anyone's winter condo in Florida - it pays about \$9 hourly - Smith cites "financial security" as only one reason why post-career professionals are attracted to Borders. The chain offers them flexible schedules and a way to "stay on top of what's going on in the world," he says. It also provides a benefit part-timers usually are denied: healthcare coverage. The strategy seems to be succeeding. About 18 percent, or 5,400, of Borders employees are at least 50 years old, double the number six years ago. By 2010, the company expects about one-quarter to be 50 or older.

Claire Raines, chief executive of Claire Raines Associates in Tucson, which offers corporate training on "generational diversity," says the new workforce is challenging companies. "The executive who thought one size fits all, that just isn't going to work anymore." In a scenario that could be lifted from *The Office*, Raines envisions a young worker labeling older colleagues "dinosaurs and technophobes," while the senior set bristles at the 21-year-old who text-messages during a meeting. More friction is likely to be generated between boomers and Gen Xers, she says, because the age differential is closer to parent-child than grandparent-grandchild.

"THERE ARE ALWAYS CRITICISMS ABOUT THINGS LIKE ATTIRE FROM one generation to another, but those are minor skirmishes," says Jeff Davis, senior vice president of human resources at

Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. "Our younger workers cherish the opportunity to work with more senior people. They're a calming influence." The need to retain workers at or nearing retirement age is acute in the healthcare industry. The aging population means "we get more business but have a smaller pool from which to recruit employees," Davis says. "We have to keep experienced people around to teach. You come into the healthcare professions along the lines of an apprenticeship." About 5,800 of Mass. General's 21,000 employees are 50 and older, and it is searching for more, including through websites such as [RetirementJobs.com](http://RetirementJobs.com), based in Waltham. To accommodate them, the hospital is retooling the way some work is done. For example, it plans to install lifts at every bed to minimize the need for manual labor.

Adapting jobs to suit the "multi-generational workforce" is crucial, Raines says, but employees also must be willing to change. "Everyone needs to understand what assets each age group brings." That is not easy for boomers, who are accustomed to getting the last word. "Boomers have always used the workplace to prove their worthiness as human beings," she says. "They want to keep working on their own terms."

Smyer warns of another potential problem: employers seeing older workers as a monolithic group. "Look at people five years and 50 years out of high school," he says. "Which have the greatest differences at a reunion? At the 50th, you have people coming off the tennis court and people in wheelchairs."

AT 27, COREY CARRIER IS YOUNG ENOUGH TO BE ALMEIDA'S GRANDSON. They work alongside each other at Borders. Senior colleagues are walking resource centers, Carrier says during a break in the store's cafe. "They bring a lot of value. Someone my age or younger might not be familiar with subjects like war history. Plus, older adults are usually nice guys. Al doesn't come in wearing a Nirvana T-shirt or anything. He's just comfortable with who he is." Sitting next to Carrier, Almeida smiles. He looks healthy, relaxed, with silver hair and matching eyebrows. "This is not a career, it's a job I like," he says. His prime working years were during an era when job security was, well, secure. Almeida has a Raytheon pension and health insurance - benefits a growing number of boomers will retire without or have stripped away - along with Social Security and 401(k) savings. It is enough to keep him and his wife from losing sleep over fuel bills. Still, Almeida concedes, "it would be a different existence" without his 20 hours a week at Borders. "If we want to go to dinner, we go without thinking about it," he says. He also knows retail is volatile; his position could vanish overnight.

"At Raytheon, I could be confident that if I did my job, I would have it for life," he says, raising his voice to be heard over the hiss of an espresso machine. "That isn't universally true anymore. A common complaint about younger employees is that they're not loyal. Well, a lot of companies haven't earned their loyalty." Carrier nods. Uncertainty is the norm for his generation. "It devalues what you're doing if you don't think it's going to be there one day," Carrier says quietly.

Later, Almeida peers at a computer to check inventory. A customer approaches, slightly out of breath. She is in the middle of a high-speed search for a birthday present. Some options are ruled out: No mugs, no candles, no cookbooks. Almeida knows what she might like, even though the birthday girl is of a younger generation. "How about a humorous book about turning 60?" he says. Sold. "I like talking to people," he says afterward. "Most of them come here because they want to. It's not like I'm trying to sell them tires."

UNLIKE ALMEIDA, JACQUELINE LAPIDUS DOES have to think about whether she can eat out. The

prospect of paying a restaurant tab can make her stomach churn. "I have to figure whether it's an affordable luxury," she says. Lapidus, 66, lives alone in a two-bedroom Brighton condo and still carries a mortgage on it. The freelance editor, writer, and French translator boasts a glittering resume - highlights include stints at Life and Walking magazines and an 18-year stretch in Paris, where she worked for the French edition of Reader's Digest. But none of her former employers offered her retirement benefits. "Mostly, I've been underemployed," she says. "I live very modestly."

Lapidus is under contract for part-time work with the French-language website of Oxfam America, supplementing that with Social Security and funds from small inheritances. She does not buy the argument that people like her are in vogue. "There is not a huge rush to hire us for meaningful work. I know women who have been laid off in their late 40s and early 50s who have had the worst possible time trying to find another job," she says. "And if I don't have to, I'm not going to do something I would really loathe, like selling retail. This country is an absolute disgrace in terms of retirement benefits and healthcare."

Russell, of AARP, says she understands such discontent. As employers continue to push responsibility for retirement savings onto employees, "there's less of a guarantee that there's going to be enough," she says. Some worry about outliving their funds or facing the staggering costs of long-term care. Many nearing the far edge of their careers reject the idea of being forced to subsist on a stingy fixed income. "They want to work to remain mentally and physically active, and they feel they have more to offer," Russell says.

That does not mean life is all work. Some seniors at least entertain the idea of a more leisurely pace. For instance, McCarthy, the former general manager, planned to play golf three times a week after his power plant career ended. He soon found the fairway seemed more like an infirmary. "All the guys talked about was how many milligrams of this or that they were taking and when their next appointments were," he says. "I couldn't take it. I walked off in the middle of a round." Ever since, the Red Sox greeter has happily operated on a new working theory: "If you stop, you drop."

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