



**Golden Boomers:
Creating a Second Midlife for Meaning and Money**

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Chapter 10

CAREER DEVELOPMENT FOR A VERY LONG LIFE

by Verne Wheelwright

The probability of living a healthy life to age 100 is increasing, and the possibility of living well beyond 100 years is also appearing credible. The question here is, *What will people do with all the extra years of life?* Faced with decades of life beyond *retirement age* will people retire, stay in their present careers, reeducate themselves for different or better positions, reduce their working hours, do volunteer work, or a combination of these or other alternatives? How will career consultants guide them? Retirement as we know it now may become less attractive as people decide that decades of life devoted to fishing, golf, traveling and grandchildren is not enough to be fulfilling. How does the prospect of living a very long life impact career development?

The answer to that question is already beginning to unfold, as retirement-age early Boomers are staying longer in their current positions or considering new careers (Johnson, R., Butrica, B., & Mommaerts, C., 2010). Boomers will redefine retirement. As a group, they have the potential to live longer than any previous generation. Boomers are an amalgamation of groups, representing many trends and a number of generalizations. The truth is that the group is so large (estimates range upward from 76 million) that only a small percentage of boomers can be sufficient to create, change or move markets. Life expectancy in the United States has been increasing steadily over the past century, from declining U. S. birth rates. Biomedical advancements are taking place today that suggest longer and healthier lives ahead. Possibly much longer. Research is also taking place in the area of expanding human life span.

To clarify these terms, life expectancy at birth is the average number of years any individual in a population is expected to live. Life span is the maximum number of years a human can live, presently accepted as about 120 (Hayflick, 1994). The longest known life has been that of Jeanne Calment of France, who lived 122 years. (Wagner, 1999).

There is already evidence that people are staying in their careers longer, and discussions are taking place in Washington to raise the age for receiving full Social Security benefits. In short, the probability of living a healthy life to age 100 is increasing, and the possibility of living well

beyond 100 years is also appearing credible. The question here is, *What will people do with all the extra years of life?* Faced with decades of life beyond *retirement age* will people retire, stay in their present careers, re-educate themselves for different or better positions, reduce their working hours, do volunteer work, or a combination of these or other alternatives? And how will career consultants guide them? Retirement as we know it now may become less attractive as people decide that decades devoted to fishing, golf, traveling and grandchildren are not enough to be fulfilling.

At this point it may be helpful to consider the forces that reside in each individual's life that will probably drive personal decisions about careers, retirement, and the future in general. In my research in the field of Foresight and Futures Studies, I have focused on individual lives and futures, or Personal Futures. That research began with people over age sixty, exploring their lives in the present and the past to recognize patterns that would be helpful to people who were trying to explore or understand their own futures.

One of the most important outcomes of that research was that humans are natural multi-taskers. Our lives are complex, and we deal with multiple facets of our lives every day (Wheelwright, 2006)

The research suggested that *human life can be divided into six areas, or domains*. Each of these domains is a collection of forces that impact our lives, causing us to take actions or make decisions. These forces are the same from birth to death, although as infants and children, the needs of some of those domains are met by our parents. The six domains include:

Activities: All the things you do, including school, work, sports, hobbies, religion and other activities.

Finances: Everything to do with your finances, including income, expense, investments, insurance, credit cards, debt, taxes and assets.

Health: Your physical and mental health, including health care, nutrition, exercise, medications and prevention of illness or injury.

Housing: Your home as well as your neighborhood, community, country, region and climate in which you live.

Social: Your relationships with family, friends, acquaintances, co-workers, advisors and other people.

Transportation or mobility. Your various transportation needs and the methods available including walking, personal transport and public transportation.

The point here is that as baby boomers and others start approaching historic retirement ages, their decisions and options will be complicated by the possibility or probability of living a very long life. If, as some suggest, large numbers of boomers live to 100 and beyond (Klein, 2003),

that would leave them three or more decades to plan for beyond the traditional retirement age. The next consideration is that for those who are still healthy when they actually reach 100, life span research (telomerase, for example) may have reached a point where more decades have been added to the human life span. The combination of improving health, repairing aging bodies and extending the human life span could take some boomers well beyond 120 years. There are possibilities for additional leaps in longevity. If the human lifespan is extended beyond 120 years, then immortality or at least extremely long lives must be considered (Bova. 1998).

If people recognize that they can be as physically and mentally capable in their seventies, eighties, and nineties as they are in their fifties and sixties, how will that affect their planning for their future? The first consideration here is the Activities domain. What will people do with their time during all those extra years of life? There is already a generation that is dealing with retirement that anticipated a number of years and turned into decades. Individuals who retired in order to play golf or go fishing every day for the rest of their lives have found themselves tiring of their favorite pastimes. By the time they understood how their lives were changing, it was very difficult to return to a previous career after such a long absence. The industries from which they had retired had changed, their skills had eroded, and their relationships had faded. Understanding that they may live to be healthy centenarians should help individuals, clients, not only to prepare for very long lives, but to plan to make their future years interesting and meaningful. Some of the considerations and decisions clients will face include:

Retirement—when, if ever?

Discretionary time—how much “free time” is desired? What will be done in that time?

Education or training—what education or training is needed or required?

Career, occupation, profession—what field and how much time will be devoted?

Change—when is a career change or upgrade desired?

Achievement—what does the individual want to achieve in life?

Geography—where (in the world) is the best place to continue one’s career?

A recent article in *Business Week* (Coy, P., Conlin, M., Herbst, M., 2010) details the increase in the number of temporary and contract workers. This is an approach that may prove attractive to older workers who have their own insurance (Medicare in the United States) and are able to take breaks between assignments. Further, technology is now making it possible to practice many careers from anywhere, so many boomers may

find they can enjoy many of the benefits of retirement while still pursuing their careers. Yet questions remain. Will there be jobs available for people over 80 and if so, what kind? Will employers value experience or will they be reluctant to hire older workers either for full time positions or as contract workers. What laws or rules are involved?

There is one more important question to consider. What if the individual becomes a healthy centenarian, then finds that he or she has another fifty years of life remaining? If that seems like fantasy, remember that a person who is sixty-five today has thirty-five remaining years to reach one hundred. Research that is underway today could very well result in very long lives. Living to one hundred seems a reasonable expectation today, but in thirty-five years, one-hundred-fifty or more may be just as acceptable.

These considerations and possibilities bring the second personal domain, Finances, into focus. What amount must an individual have in savings and income to be able to stop working for the rest of his or her life? Does that figure change if the individual's life expectancy increases to one-hundred or one-hundred-fifty, or more? What amount of income and savings provide an adequate life-style? Are the investments that provide that income secure from substantial loss of either income or principle?

The third area of life to consider, particularly in older years, is the Health domain. Health is a controlling domain. Some would say it is *the* controlling domain. If one is sick or disabled, the quality of life may be affected or limited. There are some health conditions that can be managed with regular medication. Enlarged prostate is one example of a condition that can affect the quality of your life, but can be controlled with daily medication. Diabetes can also be managed with monitoring and careful attention to diet. The same is true of several heart and vascular conditions; they can be managed with attention and medications including statins, beta blockers and other pharmaceuticals that have been developed in recent years. Cataracts can be surgically replaced with lens implants. All of these conditions become more common as one gets older, so it is not unusual for people in their seventies and eighties to take several medications every day to control or manage their conditions. Yet, most of these people are able to enjoy a high quality of life and continue in a career. It is helpful to recognize that many medical procedures, tests, medications, and systems that are saving lives today did not exist twenty years ago. Ablation therapy, for example, is a treatment for dangerously irregular heart rhythms that was not available twenty years ago, yet is in common usage today. Imagine the advances that will come over the next twenty years in the bio-sciences and in medical technology. The big changes in medical science that are on the horizon will be largely related

to cures and repairs, followed by maintenance. Many types of cancer will eventually be cured, adding many years of life for recovered patients. New treatments will replace chemotherapy and radiation, relieving patients of some of the severe effects of treatment and improving quality of life. One area of research focuses on repairing telomeres, which may even reverse some effects of aging.

Although medical science will probably reduce many of the risks of disease and death, science may not stop the aging process entirely. Every individual's body and mind will still require maintenance and care to avoid illness and to prevent deterioration. Each person will still have to work at keeping their body healthy and in good condition, so the physical and mental condition of the body at age sixty will provide the foundation for the rest of life. If a person enters their sixties in excellent health and physical condition, they have a chance of retaining that condition into much later life. If the individual is already declining in health and physical condition at sixty, he or she will have to work extra hard to get up to normal and stay there. As Drs. James Rowe and Robert Kahn, authors of *Successful Aging* (1998) advise, the three steps to a healthy life in one's later years include:

Avoid disease

Engage with life

Maintain high cognitive and physical function

The Housing domain will offer new choices and opportunities as boomers recognize the increasing likelihood of a very long life. Once the family nest is empty and the mortgage paid off, there will be a greater freedom of choice; the possibility to live anywhere in the world, to have multiple homes, to live wherever the climate is most favorable. There are already substantial numbers of retirement age people who are known as *snow-birds*, because they live in a northern climate in the summer and in a southern climate in the winter. Yet, as mentioned earlier, technology provides connectivity that enables individuals to stay in touch with their clients and careers no matter where they may be living at any time.

The Social Domain relates to family, friends and social networks; all the people one knows or interacts with at all levels. For many individuals, the status and social interaction related to a career is very important, yet it is one of the first things to be lost upon retirement. Many people whose careers include responsibility, authority and perks are dismayed to find that retirement is so completely different. Some find it a shock, while others find it a relief. One of the attractions of retirement is the time available to spend with family and friends, and especially with grandchildren. As life spans increase, people in their eighties and nineties will enjoy several generations of descendants. An individual who lives to one-

hundred-fifty might be a great-great-great-great-great grandparent! As one grows older, friends and family members will die. One of the great concerns of many very old people at the present is that they have no friends. They have outlived their social networks.

Computers, the Internet and social networking have already changed how people socialize. Families that have spread apart over great physical distances are able to exchange e-mails frequently and talk together face to face on their computers with the aid of web cams and services such as Skype. It seems logical that new services will be introduced that keep families, friends and acquaintances in close contact, possibly with the aid of 3-D, avatars or holographic images as technologies are enhanced and new approaches introduced.

Transportation is the final personal domain to consider. Probably the most important form of transportation worldwide is walking. Aging into the last quarter-century of life brings home the importance of maintaining the ability to walk for as late in life as possible. This paper started with the assumption that a very long and healthy life was available to boomers, but every individual will have to do his or her part to maintain their health and specifically the ability to walk, because walking is a critical part one's independence. For individuals making decisions about continuing a career into their eighties, nineties, or beyond, transportation may become an issue. For example, younger people may accept long commutes as a requirement for their position, but older people may be less tolerant of that requirement. Some may accept a lesser position in order to avoid a long commute.

Beyond the needs of each of individual's personal domains, there is another important area to consider and that is personal values; the mores, desires, and preferences that guide one's life. Preparing for a very long life may begin with a review of one's values. What is important to an individual now, and what will be important at age eighty, ninety, or one hundred? It may be surprising, but personal values often change during different periods of an individual's life. For example, time, particularly discretionary time, may become more valuable to some individuals than money or power. Personal relationships, grandchildren for example, may become more important than professional relationships.

Once an individual achieves financial independence, personal values may shift from achieving that status to simply maintaining it. In short, personal values change over time, and career development counselors will benefit from recognizing those changes. Understanding the six personal domains and how each individual client relates to his or her personal domains will be valuable as well. For career counselors, the plausibility of greatly increased longevity for the boomer generation provides a

combination of challenges and opportunities. The challenge of planning for careers that extend an individual's useful working life by decades is a considerable change from the traditional pattern of working until retirement age, then stopping work. For some individuals, there was a competitive desire to see how early they could retire. Now, as the longevity pattern shifts, the emphasis is likely to move from total retirement to a balance between careers and discretionary time. Professional career counselors will be charged with finding that balance.

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