



REINVENT YOUR CAREER, and Get Ready for the NEXT 30 YEARS

By Tamara J. Erickson

LONGER LIFE EXPECTANCIES ARE CREATING A NEW LIFE STAGE, AND MANY BOOMERS WILL HAVE AS MUCH TIME FOR THEIR SECOND CAREER AS THEY DID FOR THEIR FIRST.

Which of the following statements do you believe to be true?

- The workplace rejects older workers, welcoming only young talent.
- Working, particularly in corporations, requires accepting rigid schedules and high-pressure job options.
- Most of us will enjoy a few good years of active life after retirement—long enough for a cruise and a few rounds of golf—and then be happy to rest.

All three of these assumptions are integral parts of the mental model that most people use as they think about retirement. And all are, or soon will be, completely wrong.

As the economy rebounds, the workplace will need older workers to fill a widening talent gap between the number of people available to work and the demand for workers, particularly those with skills and experience. Growth in knowledge-based jobs will lessen the demand for physical labor and reinforce acceptance of older workers

The growing shortage of talent will shift power—those who want to work will have more options for reshaping the relationship between employees and employers. Coupled with the advances in communication

technology, possibilities to work whenever and wherever you prefer will proliferate.

The bottom line is that most people will have 20 to 30 years of healthy, productive life after age 65. Boomers (typically defined as those born between 1946 and 1964) will be the first generation to enjoy a new life stage—a significant period of active, non-child-rearing life.

With current life expectancies permitting people to live into their 90s, boomers who will be leaving their first career in their mid-60s will have 20 or 30 more years ahead of them, which is far too much time for this active generation to spend on cruise boats or golf courses.

Many will have as much time for a second career as they had for their first—ample years to go back to school, start in a new profession, found a company, or almost anything else one can imagine.

A new leaf

Now is the time to throw out old assumptions and begin dreaming of how to spend those 30 years. Even if “retirement” is still 15 or more years away, you can begin today to prepare for a happy and successful next phase of life.

If you’re among the lucky minority of the workforce (20 percent or so) who loves their current work, you’re in an enviable position. You can start discussing flexible work arrangements with your employer and get ready to enjoy the productive years ahead.



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But if you're among the roughly 80 percent who are not all that thrilled with work life, now is also the time to reinvent yourself and take advantage of a great "do-over" opportunity.

There are three core practices for reinvention:

- 1. Explore.** Meet new people and explore new ideas in ways that will uncover possibilities.
- 2. Experiment.** Take small steps, often while holding on to the old until you find new ones that work for you.
- 3. Strengthen your edge.** Consolidate your experiences to build a strong personal reputation, while continually refreshing the leading edge that provides your greatest value.

Explore

For most of us, taking time to think of new and interesting things to do is a formidable task. We have all met people who were able to describe a seemingly rational step-by-step career development process, but in reality, such clarity is often crafted with the benefit of hindsight. Many of their specific individual steps were probably triggered by encounters along the way—people met, conversations held, and observations made.

One of the best ways to find a remarkable path forward is to put yourself in interesting places, in contact with interesting people, and experiencing the energizing shifts in behaviors and attitudes underway in the world around us. Staying strictly within our intimate circles of close friends and family may not present a full palette of alternatives; these relationships tend to preserve stability and offer only ideas already familiar to us.

Start with the quest for interesting people. When you're feeling "stuck," one of the best approaches is to reconfigure

your network—shift your relationships, meet new people, and make connections with individuals who have perspectives or experiences different from your own. Surround yourself with intriguing people doing different things. Put energy into joining, forming, and actively participating in networks. Experiment with the following approaches:

- Revitalize the many contacts you've made during your career thus far. Create contact files with up-to-date records of who's who, where they work, and how to get in touch.
- Join a professional association. Don't just attend the meetings; get involved by taking on a leadership role. Be visible, and show what you can do.
- Participate in your college or graduate school's alumni events.
- Look for groups to join that will allow you to develop relationships with people you would not typically meet; for example, clubs formed around hobbies you enjoy, charities, or community groups.
- Join an online network. Social networks in the business world are becoming useful ways to connect colleagues and business associates.
- Spend time around people in their teens and 20s. If you don't have children of your own, borrow some—get to know your friends' children.
- Travel to new places with your eyes wide open. Talk with people you encounter along the way, and in particular, be on the lookout for things that strike you as unusual. Also, watch for things that don't seem to fit—these are critically important clues for the future.

It's important to work your network. Touch base with your contacts on a regular basis, even if it's just with a brief email about an interesting article or a relevant idea. Talk with people about what they're enjoying, and what's frustrating to them.

Explore the world through active use of new technologies and approaches. Browse websites that can provide you with new ideas and possibilities. Consider how the Internet and related technologies are altering the way things are getting done today.

Consciously seek out experiences that will continually refresh and stimulate your ideas. Remember that while strong relationships provide us with an important sense of security and support, new ideas and insights usually come from having many weaker connections—acquaintances and others you encounter only briefly. Move outside your familiar comfort zone, beginning today.

Experiment

Because changing careers—reinventing—is an iterative process, almost no one gets it right in one big step. Try something new, evaluate how well it really fits with your needs and preferences, and then take another step.

Start by creating a long list of possibilities based on your explorations, as well as the life you've already led. Be expansive in your thinking. It's easier to know that one option

suits you particularly well if you've also experienced ones that don't match. Consider:

- a form or type of expression you particularly enjoy: campaigning, selling, teaching, writing
- something you've dreamt of doing: playing music, creating art, caring for others
- causes you care deeply about: the environment, opportunities for young people, political reform, the homeless
- unfinished agendas: idealistic teenage ambitions that are yet unfulfilled, ways you've wanted to give back or create change
- a favorite hobby or avocation: gardening, pets, reading
- an unmet need in the market or, more narrowly, within your local community.

Next, test some of your ideas in a low-risk, low-commitment way. Find ways to try out new activities and roles on a small scale before making a major commitment. Craft experiments designed to narrow the list to find out what items you want to cross off and what you'd like to explore further. Use the five principles of experimentation:

Design a test. Think of ways to try several of the possibilities on your list. Look for a way to test whether it is something you really enjoy, before you plunge in with both feet. For example, could you teach a class in your community's adult education evening program to see if you might like to become a teacher full time?

Know what you want to learn from each test. For example, are you trying to learn whether you like working as an independent consultant, whether a specific subject area is one you enjoy, or both?

Step back at specific times to debrief and reflect. Obtain feedback from others. How is your plan working? How well does a chosen option match the characteristics you felt were most important?

Build on the knowledge gained to shape new tests. If you enjoy some, but not all, of an activity, how will you modify it? What are the variants on your new possibility that would align it with your ultimate goals?

Recognize failure as an acceptable outcome. The point is to move some things off your list. So figure out what you don't want to build a second career around. Think of failure not only as an acceptable, but to some extent, a preferred outcome for many of your initial possibilities.

Strengthen your edge

Stay sharp and ready for whatever opportunities you find. Understand your unique value, and develop a plan to strengthen your differentiated skills and capabilities on an ongoing basis. Think of it as building a personal brand.

Identify the sweet spot that represents your unique strengths, special passions, and practical realities. As you think about your brand, remember that it does not have to be a specific area of knowledge. It may include "soft" attributes, such as your dependability, enthusiasm, motivation, flexibility, and people

orientation. What comes to your colleagues' minds when they think of you?

Try to capture your brand in language that represents others' perceptions and feelings about you. Imagine that someone was going to do a Google search to find you. What key words would you want linked to your name? The more you clarify this in your mind, the better able you will be to build and reinforce your brand throughout all your related activities.

Develop a "product development" strategy for investments in yourself. Identify the edges of your expertise—where things are changing the fastest? Think about your leading edge—what are your most differentiated and valuable skills today? Uncover what you need to learn to make sure that you continue to have differentiated and high-value skills in the future. And determine which of your current capabilities are likely to become obsolete and which will need to grow and be refreshed to remain unique tomorrow.

Develop a learning and development strategy. Select several of the ways of learning—for example, participating in formal education, experiencing new things, and putting yourself in situations that will challenge and extend your capabilities—that you'll incorporate into your work this year. With your unique edge in mind, invest in yourself to ensure that you continue to have high-value capabilities in our rapidly evolving knowledge economy.

Although some people associate career change with something radical and therefore risky (jumping the corporate ship to pursue a wild passion or an avocation), it doesn't have to be that way. The notion of a single career is becoming obsolete, and a midcareer change is becoming a sign of success in adapting, rather than a failure to thrive in one's original occupation. Identify activities you'd like to explore further, and begin reinventing yourself today.

Get ready to harness the next two or three decades of your productive capacity, whether in traditional work or via a less conventional application of your skills. The opportunities you choose should fit your own special needs, unique talents, and personal passions.

Have a wonderful 30, or more, years! **T+D**

Tamara J. Erickson is an expert on organizations and the changing workforce and enhancing innovation and productivity. She is executive vice president of nGenera and the author of *Retire Retirement: Career Strategies for the Boomer Generation*; terickson@ngenera.com.

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