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Work vs. leisure time is a choice facing retirees



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Our Time
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Do we laugh or do we cry?

The latest report from Pew Research Center says the recession is impacting two age groups: young and old adults.

According to their Social and Demographic Trends project, the downturn is keeping older adults in the workforce longer and younger adults out of the workforce longer.

Then the researchers say both of these trends "started before the downturn, both are intensified by it and both appear poised to outlast it."

The New York Times reports that "a reluctance to retire means fewer openings" for younger workers.

The article says in other parts of the developed world, people are retiring as planned "because of the relatively flush state and corporate pensions that await them. But here in the United States, financial security in old age rests increasingly on private savings, which have taken a beating in the last year. Prospective retirees are clinging to jobs despite some cherished life plans."

Now all this is occurring against an earlier backdrop, which encouraged older workers to always have "purpose."

Indeed, psychologist and gerontologist Ken Dychtwald earlier this year wrote "With Purpose: Going from Success to Significance in Work and Life." Dychtwald argues that leaving a legacy is more important than years of retired leisure.

As the lifespan increased at least 30 years in the 20th century, many have insisted retiring at 65 for 20 to 30 years of leisure is unsustainable.

Individuals need to stay engaged with some sort of activity, whether work or meaningful volunteering, these gerontologists insist.

Why do we think we should retire at 65?

Because Otto Von Bismark, Prussia's chancellor, tried to stifle social unrest by establishing a state pension plan in 1887. Bismark picked 65 as the age to receive a state pension at a time when the average lifespan ended at age 63.

President Franklin Roosevelt, establishing Social Security and its pension plan, adopted the age 65.

That age has been raised to age 67 for those born in 1960 or later, but the program still validates our mindset that work should be over, that productivity should end, by the mid-60s.

Discussion about national health care is just the tip of the iceberg, say some sociologists and economists. Next on the horizon: how to refine and redesign Social Security to more effectively match the workability and productivity of people over 60.

Economics is not today's older worker incentive, says Pew Research.

Their study shows that the big reason older adults stay in the workforce longer is the intangible benefits: they want to feel productive and engaged. Indeed, a majority of workers 65 and older say the main reason they work is because they want to. Only about one in six say the main reason is that they need a paycheck, Pew reports.

At the same time, 16- to 24-year-olds are staying in high school or college, Pew said. Some 57 percent are employed, down from 66 percent in 2000.

European workers, in so-called "socialized" economies where taxes are higher, feel free to quit work, the economists point out.

The question for Americans appears to be what is better: more leisure time or more productive years?

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