



Retirement: Some Struggle with Leaving Their Jobs

By Nanci Hellmich | October 28, 2014

When many people retire, they jump into their new lifestyle with gusto, but others mourn leaving their jobs and feel like they've lost part of their identity, experts say.

"Work is the primary source of identity for many of us and absorbs our best energies and creativity, so retirement is a major transition," says psychologist Kris Ludwigsen, 69, of Martinez, Calif.

Many people give so much of themselves to their jobs that they don't have the time or energy to develop other interests, and they are left adrift in retirement, she says. "Their job gave their life meaning, and not having that is the worst stress of all. That's why some people want to continue to work as long as they can."

One of the issues is whether you enjoy your job or not, says Norman Abeles, professor emeritus of psychology at Michigan State University in East Lansing. If your job is unpleasant, you may think it's better to get out at whatever cost, not realizing that the cost may be higher than you think, both financially and psychologically, he says.

Many retirees miss both the money and the companionship that their work provided, he says. "It's important, if you enjoy your work, to continue to work. I worked until I was 80."

Although there is nothing wrong with associating yourself with your job, your entire identity shouldn't be wrapped up in it, says Ernie Zelinski, 65, author of *The Joy of Not Working and How to Retire Happy, Wild, and Free*. "Your true self is based on many more profound things, such as your creativity, kindness, pursuits, generosity, love, joy, spontaneity, connection with others, sense of humor and spirituality."

A recent survey showed that the majority of pre-retirees (72%) would like to keep working in retirement. Almost half (47%) of current retirees either are working, have worked or plan to work in retirement. About 62% of working retirees continued to work to stay mentally active; 46%, to stay physically active; 42%, social connections; 36%, sense of identity and self-worth; 31%, to make money, according to the survey sponsored by Merrill Lynch in partnership with Age Wave.

Another study of 100 U.S. retirees, conducted for the Transamerica Center for Retirement Studies, found that 67% of those who are fully retired say they retired sooner than they had planned. Among the most frequently cited reasons: their own ill health (46%); unemployment/job loss (33%); family responsibilities such as becoming a caregiver (9%); realizing they had already saved enough to retire (7%); receiving a windfall (3%); other (25%).

That same survey showed 61% say they immediately stopped working when they retired; 20% changed the way they work, for example going part time or working on temporary contracts, before retiring.

Carolee Duckworth, 68, co-author of *Shifting Gears To Your Life and Work After Retirement*, knows how important meaningful work is to many people. After Duckworth retired as a Web design professor, she realized "without work I couldn't function.

"I wasn't looking to play golf. I was looking for that identity piece that comes with a job or career. I wanted to know: 'What am I now?'"

She tried several careers before she settled on writing travel books. It's completely different from what she did before, and she loves it. You have to find something that's uniquely you, she says. Your goal is to find a new a mission statement for the rest of your life, Duckworth says.

For many people that means letting go of the past. When people retire they have to go through the process of grieving and moving forward, she says.

The process can take time, and unfortunately, there aren't a lot of meaningful ways to talk about losing your work identity, she says. "It's hard to even articulate what you are going through. A lot of people get stuck, and they never go through the grieving process.

"But as you let go of what you were before, then figure out and focus on what you want to do next — paid job, volunteer work, hobbies, other interests, or some combination — you will enter what can be the most meaningful, creative and fruitful time of your life — and have great fun in the process," Duckworth says.

There are three important needs that the job provides that people have to put back into their lives in retirement: Structure, purpose and a sense of community, says Zelinski, who has an MBA and has worked as a public speaker, writer and teacher at a vocational school, but hasn't had a "regular job" in 35 years. Some people have an easy time getting those back in their lives; some don't, he says.

To make the adjustment to retirement, you may have to start thinking in new ways, Zelinski says. You have to start doing new things, going to new places, meeting new people and developing different hobbies and interests, he says. It's best if you do that while you're still working.

Ludwigsen retired at age 62 after a 35-year career that included working as a psychotherapist, teacher, researcher, writer and editor. She left when she did because the demands of the job "were increasing while my energy level was decreasing."

She made the transition by shifting her focus to traveling more, writing, joining women's groups and writing clubs and getting involved in the pastoral ministry at her church.

Now, she's working with her minister on a series of lectures on the spiritual and psychological issues involved with death and dying, and she is visiting people who are confined. "It's engaging me intellectually, psychologically and spiritually."

She says in retirement she feels "needed and useful but not overwhelmed."

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