

A conversation with Marc Freedman, author of  
*ENCORE: Finding Work That Matters in the Second Half of Life*

*Many experts predict that tens of millions of baby boomer retirements over the next two decades will take this country to the edge of economic and social collapse. Do you see that happening?*

By 2030, one in four Americans will be over 60. If the Golden Years retirement-as-leisure lifestyle predominates, we'll see generational conflicts everywhere. The Millennial generation—then in their 30s and 40s will be forced into taking “extreme working” to new heights to support children, elderly family members and entitlement programs. But we can avert this unhappy scenario.

*What will stop the boomers from taking America—and future generations—to the cleaners?*

Worst-case scenarios do sometimes come to pass. But nearly all the dire predictions that have become such a prominent part of the intellectual and policy landscape contain a simple, central fallacy: They take retirement as we've known it as an eternal verity, as a given and a constant.

The predictors of doom jam together the new *numbers*, the demographic reality of a vast flood of boomers moving through their sixties and beyond, with the old *lifestyle*, a static conception of future behavior based on the leisure-driven retirement that was the hallmark of the past. This is scenario building through the rearview mirror.

*Are you saying that boomers don't want leisure-driven retirements?*

Some do, but most don't. Given today's lifespans, not many people look forward to endless retirement, thirty years of R&R. More to the point: they can't afford it—even those with a diligent savings plan. The Golden Years version of retirement that reigned over the past half century is obsolete. Stretched from a sensible and justified period of leisure and relaxation into a phase as long as midlife in duration, retirement, once a powerful version of the American dream, has been distorted into something that no longer works for most individuals—or for the nation.

*If the old view of retirement is obsolete, what's taking its place?*

Retirement as we've known it is in the midst of being displaced as the central institution of the second half of life. It's being supplanted by a new stage of life opening up between the end of midlife and the arrival of true old age, a period that essentially amounts to the second half of life, at least adult life. And that's just the half of it: The new phase under development is every bit as much **a new stage of work**.

We now know that baby boomers are going to work longer than their parents did, whether they have to or want to, or most likely of all, will be propelled to extended working lives by some combination of the two. Four out of five boomers consistently tell researchers that they expect to work well into what used to be known as the retirement years. And half of those between 50 and 70 say that they want to do work that improves life in their communities.

### ***What makes this “new stage of work” worthy of our attention?***

The movement of millions of these individuals into a new phase of work constitutes one of the most significant transformations in work this country has witnessed since millions of women broke through to new roles in the labor market, roles that had been off-limits to their mothers’ generation. And much like the movement of women into the workplace, boomers’ extended stay on the job is likely to have reverberations for all generations and for the very nature of work in America.

The impact of this shift is profound. Sectors will be transformed. Employers will search for new ways to recruit and retain experienced workers. The structure of jobs and their benefits will change, potentially creating more workplace flexibility. And younger workers will begin to think of—and plan for—the arc of their careers in a radically different way.

### ***What’s good about longer working lives?***

Longer working lives bring with them many potential benefits for individuals—a longer time to earn and save, as well as purpose, structure, physical and mental health, and an expanding social circle. And longer working lives can dramatically improve the fiscal picture of a much grayer nation. If most individuals work five additional years—delaying their benefits and continuing to make their payroll contributions and regular income tax payments—the projected 2045 Social Security deficit would more than disappear.

### ***Five more years of work? That sounds exhausting!***

It’s certainly true that most people are exhausted and interested in taking a break after the end of midlife careers. But once they’re rested, most get restless. At this point in their lives, many boomers seem to want something more from work, not less. They yearn for work that not only pays the bills and provides other benefits, such as identity and structure, but also that provides a larger sense of purpose and contribution that retirement just doesn’t offer. Instead of the **freedom from work**, they are searching for the **freedom to work**, in new ways, on new terms, to new and more meaningful ends.

### ***What kind of work will boomers do?***

Work in the second half of life is becoming increasingly contested terrain. Retail employers are beginning to hire more older employees, but as lives come full circle, the subtle implication is that so too should careers, with jobs at the end resembling the low-paid, part-time, McJobs of our youth—though perhaps with “greeting” replacing lawn mowing. Some boomers are looking for “phased retirements” or “bridge jobs,” which deliver a form of semiretirement characterized by gradual disengagement. There’s good and bad there. But we need more compelling alternatives—jobs that pull boomers in for 10 or more years, jobs that make the best and highest use of education and experience, jobs that will have a measurable impact in solving long-standing social problems. We’re just beginning to see more of these open up in the nonprofit and public sectors, but it’s certainly not easy for individuals to find them.

### ***What needs to change to engage more boomers in encore careers?***

We’re seeing the demise of a 50-year social contract in America. For half a century, we’ve essentially told older Americans to please stop contributing. We have implored them—through money and financial incentives—to leave the workplace by age 65 or,

even better, earlier. For 50 years, this worked. Young people could enter the labor market, and retirees had the opportunity for a period of active leisure.

But things have changed. As boomers face longer, healthier lives, society faces labor shortages and fiscal crisis. We need to forge a new compact around longer working lives. We need nothing less than a new social contract focused on work in the second half of life. In return for longer contribution, we need to once again make it worth people's while: provide a genuine sabbatical, better pathways to new purpose, a policy agenda that removes disincentives to longer work, even a cultural vision that equates continued contribution with success.

***Does retirement have a place in today's society?***

People will still retire, but they will do so at later ages and in different ways. There is still a place for retiring from work and activity when you are no longer healthy enough to do either, but that age has extended well past one's 60s and even 70s. Today's typical 55- or 60-year-old is not interested in heading permanently for the sidelines.

***What are the first steps for boomers looking for encore careers? Won't they face age discrimination and problems getting health insurance?***

It's tough to change jobs after 50, let alone careers. Those who have tried have found that reinventing one's worklife calls for an act of imagination at any age. And, yes, there are problems with age discrimination and health insurance that will require major shifts in thinking and big policy changes. In the meantime, the people I profile in the book and many others are finding encore careers doing the most important and rewarding work in their lives. It's not easy, but they are questioning their values, following their passions, rethinking their training, networking, volunteering as a way to paid employment, and selling their experience as an asset. The book ends with a long list of resources to help people get started, and more resources can be found at [www.encorecareer.org](http://www.encorecareer.org).

***You're the founder and CEO of Civic Ventures, an organization devoted to achieving what you call "the experience dividend." What does Civic Ventures do?***

Civic Ventures is a think tank and spearhead for innovation, working to make the encore career a reality for millions of people. We're developing new knowledge, establishing partnerships, publishing books and articles, and piloting organizations that will lead to big change. Our Purpose Prize invests half a million dollars each year in social innovators over age 60. The BreakThrough Award recognizes social sector organizations using creative approaches to hire and employ older workers. We are shining the spotlight on 10 pilot programs at community colleges that are helping older students learn new skills for second acts that serve the public interest. We've expanded Experience Corps, a national service program of 2,000 members over 55 who are serving as tutors and mentors to children in urban public schools. And our Next Chapter initiative provides expertise and assistance to community groups working to help people set a course, connect with peers, and find pathways to significant service in the second half of life.