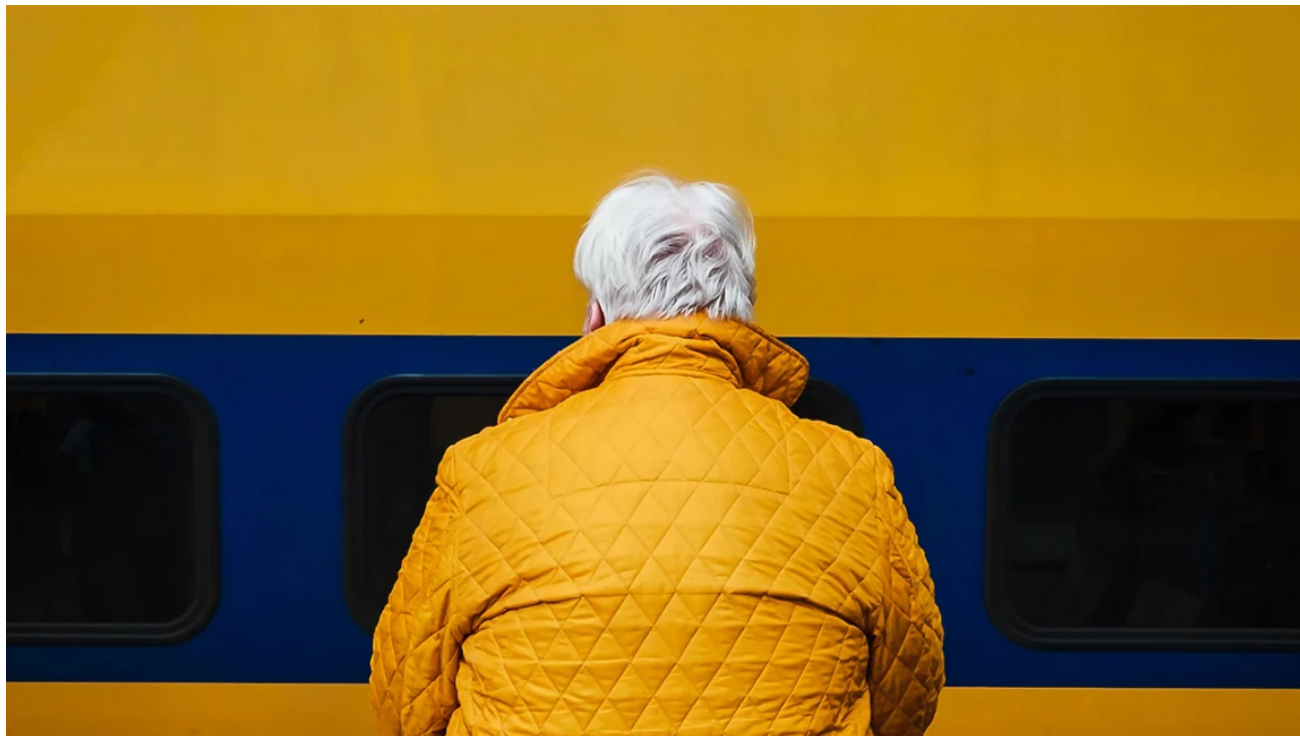


- f .
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-
-

- Co.Design
- Tech
- Work Life
- Creativity
- Impact
- Audio
- Video
- News
- Recommender
- Subscribe**

Why older workers are the economy’s hidden asset

Americans have a different view of what “retirement” means for them, and the workplace should take note.



[Photo: Serhat Beyazkaya/Unsplash]

BY CHRIS FARRELL
6 MINUTE READ

The association of old age with inevitable decline runs deep. To carry on with work—or indeed with anything more demanding than afternoon lectures, a movie, and an early dinner—during the traditional retirement years seems cute at best and depressing at worst.

Economist John Kenneth Galbraith called these common reactions—surprise laced with condescending admiration or misplaced concern—the “Still Syndrome.” It’s the “young” asking questions like, ‘Are you still well?’ ‘Are you still working?’ ‘I see that you are still taking exercise.’ ‘Still having a drink?’ As a compulsive writer, I am subject to my own special assault, ‘I see you are still writing.’ ‘Your writing still seems pretty good to me.’ The most dramatic general expression came from a friend I hadn’t seen for some years: ‘I can hardly believe you’re still alive!’

No one would think “decline” on meeting Luanne Mullin, age 71. Mullin has assembled a portfolio of activities in recent years, some paying gigs and others volunteer jobs. “Life is full,” she says, laughing. That’s an understatement. Among her jobs with incomes are project manager for a nonprofit organization in Marin County, California, that focuses on older adults and the disabled; her own coaching business and workshops; and acting gigs in the backgrounds of television and movies. Mullin has a portfolio of volunteer ventures, too. She’s a volunteer leader for the mature student organization at the College of Marin, focusing on lifelong learning. She helps produce a local documentary film series. She organizes salons bringing people together to discuss critical topics.

Mullin has plenty of company in her entrepreneurial quest. The demographics of aging ranks as one of the most significant long-term forces shaping the U.S. economy and society, alongside globalization, automation, and climate change. The numbers are striking. The U.S. Census Bureau forecasts that those individuals 65 years and older will account for more than 21 percent of the U.S. population—about 73 million—in 2030. Older Americans are also living longer, on average. Life expectancy for people reaching age 65 now averages 19.4 years. That's up from 13.9 years in 1950.

OLDER WORKERS ARE STARTING MORE BUSINESSES

Older Americans are showing plenty of zest for life at work and at home. They aren't doddering life away as antiquated stereotypes, and tasteless jokes suggest. The swelling numbers of Americans age 50 and older and their experiments in rethinking and reimagining the second half of life will have a profound impact on everyday life in America.

"In coming decades, many forces will shape our economy and our society, but in all likelihood, no single factor will have as pervasive an effect as the aging of our population," said Ben Bernanke in a speech when he was still chair of the Federal Reserve Board. For instance, the future trajectory of housing markets, public transportation networks, and urban design will be shaped by growing numbers of mature adults. The global age-friendly city initiative is encouraging many urban communities to accommodate an aging population. Well-connected transportation networks of public transit, ride-sharing apps, and on-demand vans can ease trips among modern elders to work, the grocery store, restaurants, yoga studios, and medical appointments.

An impressive body of scholarly research suggests that, given the opportunity, people in the second half of life can be as creative, innovative, and entrepreneurial as their younger peers, if not more so. Experienced adults are experimenting with different ways to stay attached to the economy, including self-employment, entrepreneurship, full-time jobs, part-time work, flexible employment, and encore careers. Here's one indication of the embrace of work: According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, between 1995 and 2016, the share of men ages 65 to 69 in the labor force rose from 28 percent to 38 percent. The comparable figures for women were 18 percent and 30 percent.

Here's another critical number with a similar message: The 55-to-64-year-old age cohort accounted for 25.5 percent of new entrepreneurs in 2016, up from 14.8 percent in 1996, according to the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that the unincorporated and incorporated self-employment rate among workers age 65 and older was the highest of any age group. The 65-plus rate of self-employment was more than triple the unincorporated rate and five times the incorporated rate of the 25-to-34-year-old age group. Put it this way: The 50-plus population will start more businesses in the years ahead than any other demographic.

WHAT OLDER WORKERS CAN BRING TO THE WORKFORCE

Here is a big, grassroots idea that is already making its presence felt: Experienced workers and 50-plus entrepreneurs rethinking and reimagining the second half of life. A new era of broad-based prosperity is within our grasp. Older adults are in the vanguard of inclusiveness by breaking down barriers to staying employed. The fight for purpose and a paycheck is a battle for respect and recognition.

"Perhaps the greatest opportunity of the twenty-first century is to envision and create a society that nurtures longer lives not only for the sake of the older generation, but also for the benefit of all age groups—what I call the Third Demographic Dividend," writes Linda Fried, dean of the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University. "To get there requires a collective grand act of imagination to create a vision for the potential of longer lives." Fried is spot on.

Older adults are already exercising their imagination as productive workers and motivated volunteers and engaged entrepreneurs. They're battling against [age discrimination](#), taking actions to remove pernicious stereotypes holding down experienced workers. Older Americans represent an enormous market for goods, services, and experiences. Many of those products and services will be built and designed by older adults with a flair for understanding the 50-plus market. The widely touted innovative benefits of employing a diverse workforce include tapping into the insights of older workers.

Several factors are coming together and reinforcing one another, bringing new ideas and different expectations about the second half of life from society's fringes to the mainstream. Boomers are better educated than previous generations. They're also healthier, with a sixty-five-year-old today having the same risk of mortality or serious illness as those in their mid-50s a generation ago.

The most under-appreciated aspect of work may well be that it's a social activity. Colleagues care if you show up. Work offers the possibility of creativity and purpose, a reason to get up in the morning, an opportunity to tap into skills and knowledge developed over the years. Work helps people stay physically fit and mentally active. Social connections are one of the best contributors to meaningful longevity and, for many older adults, the community in which they spend the most time is the workplace. Employers are finally looking at experienced workers with greater appreciation.

A big reason behind the change in employer attitudes is the relatively tight labor market of recent years. Employers continuously complain they can't find the qualified labor they need. I've never found the lament particularly convincing. It seems many experienced workers could do the job, given the chance and perhaps with some training. But executives seemed blind to the opportunity experienced workers offered—until now. Management teams are finally learning they can't afford to ignore experience.

Age discrimination is real, and a job loss around age 60 can force early retirement. The business cycle hasn't been tamed, and more recessions lie in our future. The timing of the next downturn is uncertain. But it's a safe bet that the unemployment rate will climb higher at some point, including for experienced workers in the second half of life.

That said, there is no going back. America has passed a significant inflection point when it comes to experienced workers and mature entrepreneurs creating a more welcoming economy and labor market. Experienced workers are no longer obsolete. They're a valuable asset—productive and creative—with older entrepreneurs in the vanguard.

This article is adapted from [Purpose and a Paycheck: Finding Meaning, Money, and Happiness in the Second Half of Life](#) by Chris Farrell. It is reprinted with permission from HarperCollins Leadership.

IMPACT

IMPACT

There is a simple way to improve the world's food systems



IMPACT

This transit app now can figure out your route even if you have no service



IMPACT

These eerie portraits were painted by a very disturbed AI

CREATIVITY

CREATIVITY

Spike Jonze and Jesse Williams made a totally normal weed ad for MedMen

CREATIVITY

Oh good, another reason to be mad about Green Book's Best Picture win

CREATIVITY

The 13 best (and 4 worst) moments from the Oscars

CO.DESIGN

CO.DESIGN

The real reason Amazon, Apple, and Google are some of the world's biggest companies

CO.DESIGN

Dreaming of falling off the grid? You need this solar house on wheels

CO.DESIGN

This lovely pot uses an ancient technique to keep houseplants alive

WORK LIFE

WORK LIFE

Want to take control of your digital life? Start with reclaiming leisure time

WORK LIFE

Do these things to harness your employees' drive to improve

WORK LIFE

These are the salary trends you need to know before your next negotiation