



## Many Boomers Underestimate the Stress of a Small Business

By Colleen DeBaise  
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**A GROWING NUMBER** of baby boomers — those 78 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964 — are retiring from corporate jobs and starting small businesses. But many are finding that the demands of entrepreneurship don't exactly mesh with the "golden years" of retirement.

"Owning a business is like getting married: The level of commitment is extraordinary, the amount of pressure is high — and it's unrelenting," says Ken Siegel, a workplace psychologist in Los Angeles. For older entrepreneurs, "your body is less resilient," he says. "The tolerance for distress is less — and you've got to face it, being in business is stressful."

Running the show is also time-consuming, leaving little time for travel or leisure activities traditionally associated with retirement. Like many young retirees, Greg Wessling, 55, left a successful 33-year career as an executive at Lowe's Cos. in 2005 and decided to start a small-business consulting practice as a way to "to keep myself busy a few days a week." Financially secure, with his kids through school, Wessling decided he and his wife could just "goof off" the balance of the time.

But just like his corporate job always did, Wessling found the work increasingly drawing him in, often in unexpected ways. Last November, he was advising custom home builder HouseRaising in Charlotte, N.C., when the firm's chief executive died suddenly of a heart attack. The board asked Wessling to take charge, and now the "retired" Wessling is running the company, which has a staff of 40. "It's 24-7, and, yes, there's stress that goes along with it," he says.

Life is also busy for Joe Keith, 55, who took early retirement as a result of a corporate downsizing and has recently opened his own business, an office/meeting center in Cumming, Ga., that is part of the Soho Hero franchise. "I didn't have to do it, but I couldn't stay at home watching game shows," he says. Instead, he spends his days knocking on doors, trying to round up new clients. "It's always going to be harder than you expected," says Keith, who's currently logging 12- to 16-hour days. "I could sit here and wait for clients to come in, but if you want to be successful...you go out and get it," he says. "I guess you could say I retired to start working."

About one in three of the nation's 5.6 million self-employed workers aged 50 and older made the transition to self-employment after age 50, according to a 2004 study by the AARP Public Policy Institute. Many retirees "want to do something they loved all their life, but they couldn't do because they were paying a mortgage or putting the kids in school," says Margaret Wilesmith, a counselor for SCORE<sup>1</sup>, an affiliate of the Small Business Administration, who often advises aspiring-but-aging entrepreneurs in West Palm Beach, Fla. Many relish being free from the "yoke of a corporation" and are eager to find more fulfilling work, she says.

Yet, too many times retirees "are unrealistic about running their own business," she says. While there is "tremendous psychological and emotional freedom" to opening your own shop, there's also "no bigger prison," says Wilesmith, who runs her own advertising firm. She often advises retirees — especially those with little knowledge or experience of the industry they're passionate about — to get a job in that industry first. For instance, a corporate retiree who longs to open his own restaurant should work in one first. "The rules are not any different," she says.

Indeed, too many retiree business owners misjudge the time and effort involved, and underestimate the pressure to be successful when employees or a parent franchise are involved, says Cynthia McKay, founder of Le Gourmet Gift Basket Inc., a franchisor in Castle Rock, Colo. She often gets calls from retirees who want to buy one of her franchises and become gift-basket distributors.

"They think they can hire a bunch of people, stop in, collect a paycheck and be done," says McKay. "I think people are astounded by the physical factor that running a business entails. They need to be physically there, they need to be on the phone, they need to be marketing and managing." And when customers have complaints, "they don't want to talk to a clerk — they want to talk to someone who can do the problem-solving," she says.

Of course, for some retirees, the busy time commitment ends up being worth it. Marc Freedman, founder of Civic Ventures, a San Francisco think tank for retirement and workplace issues, says retirement used to be characterized as "freedom from work." But "what we're seeing now is the emergence of a new dream that could be characterized as the 'freedom to work,'" says Freedman, who is writing about the phenomenon in an upcoming book, "Encore." Many entrepreneurs are pursuing ventures that have some type of social mission, such as community development. Still, there are "persistent" trade-offs: The rewards are great, but so are the demands. At the least, retirees should consider taking a break between their old chapter

and their next to refresh themselves, he says.

Wessling, the Lowe's retiree who now runs a custom home-building business, says he's getting a lot of personal satisfaction out of his second career, despite the long hours and busy travel schedule. He's currently helping rebuild some of the areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Does he miss the opportunity to sit on his front porch or take long cruises? Turns out, "I'm not a goof-off type of guy," says Wessling, who also teaches graduate business students at Wake Forest University. "For me, a lot of this is the chance to give back."

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.score.org/>

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