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A boomer revival

Hefty rewards for social innovators over 60 years old hint at a trend toward 'encore careers' in later life.

If Marc Freedman is right, the American workplace will soon undergo its largest transformation since the women's movement. The agents of this change? The many baby boomers who plan to delay their retirement for an "encore career."

Mr. Freedman, a social entrepreneur and CEO of Civic Ventures, a think tank, sees a new stage of life beginning where midlife careers end. As legions of older workers seek new challenges – or continue their current work – this burgeoning movement will give them a combination of continued income, greater impact, and added purpose.

Purpose is a word that figures prominently in Freedman's vocabulary. He has even established a major award by that name, the Purpose Prize – a three-year, \$9 million program honoring social innovators over the age of 60 who are working to solve critical social problems. These range from global warming to infant mortality, from hunger to high dropout rates for Hispanic students.

This week Freedman announced the 15 finalists in his second annual Purpose Prize. The five top winners, to be announced in September, will each receive \$100,000; the others \$10,000 each. In addition to reshaping their own lives, the recipients are having positive effects on their communities.

One finalist is using experience from a career in food distribution to redistribute tons of nutritious produce at a San Francisco food bank to the poor. The produce would otherwise go to waste. Another one, in Herndon, Va., is advancing the humane treatment of farm animals through the certification and labeling of meat and poultry. A third is teaching Hispanic parents in Houston computer skills to get them involved in their children's education.

And an Episcopal priest in San Francisco is helping churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques reduce energy use.

Not all encore careers come with exalted purpose, of course. But as the idea of new purpose in later life spreads, the effects can be far-reaching.

First, working seniors can help foster improved attitudes toward older people and counter negative stereotypes that diminish individuals and whole generations. Second, such work can help ease an expected labor shortage, even as it adds income.

But idealism and high hopes are not enough. Those who want to continue making a contribution will need the support of employers willing to retain them or hire them. That can include flexible schedules.

Not everyone will want to pursue an encore career with regular hours and paychecks attached. But purposeful activity can also bring new luster to the word volunteer. Too often this important contribution is saddled with outmoded images of stuffing envelopes or doing menial tasks, when in fact it carries so much potential for reaching out beyond oneself.

As repositories of knowledge, experience, and life skills, encore-career pioneers serve as vibrant examples to younger generations of the possibilities inherent in the later years – possibilities that too often remain hidden.

As Freedman notes, the Golden Years version of retirement-as-leisure that reigned for the past half century is obsolete. With or without prizes as incentives for change, there can be new purpose, pleasure, and satisfaction beyond the 18th hole.

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