

What Career Will You Choose



For the Second Half of Life?

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When the new clients started coming in, I was delighted, but a little surprised. After I published the first edition of *Repurpose Your Career: A Practical Guide for Baby Boomers*, I got calls and emails from a lot of Baby Boomers. They recognized themselves in my description of people who had lost their retirements in the crash. They, too, would have to work much longer than they anticipated, and either they couldn't, or didn't want, to go back to the industry or the jobs they'd already devoted 30 years to.

Those weren't the surprise clients. They were the ones I'd expected.

But then I started getting contacted by other people, people in their 30s or 40s, and their stories were a little different. Many of them had put off marriage until they got their careers going, but now found themselves single, childless, and disenchanted with the careers they'd made the center of their lives. Others had chosen careers that technology disrupted almost overnight, and now their skills were nearly obsolete. Many had put in a decade or more and realized their careers weren't connected at all with who they really were. They'd chosen the career because it seemed lucrative, or because someone talked them into it, or because it seemed an easy path to success. And now they just couldn't muster up another drop of enthusiasm for it.

Since my first book came out, the economic climate has changed. The technological climate continues to change. And today it's not just about Baby Boomers.

What got me here won't get me there....

Rapid evolution in technology and culture has left a lot of people feeling like the foundations on which they built their expectations and decisions have shifted or disappeared altogether. Combine a shaky foundation with the promise of more change on the horizon and it's difficult to know how to confidently make choices to carry you into the next stage of your life. Among some of the shifts that are impacting people's lives:

- More and more work is being done by robots. [Gartner](#) predicts that by 2025, a third of jobs will have been taken over by robots, smart machines or software.
- Marriage and living in family settings has been replaced by living alone. [Research by Brigham Young University](#) shows that more people live alone than ever in

history. Loneliness and social isolation pose a health risk as significant smoking and obesity.

- Social Media that can help people feel connected can also lead to a greater sense of isolation, failure and depression. Studies show that people who passively engage with sites like Facebook actually feel more alone, more a sense of failure and missing out than those who actively engage or don't engage at all.
- The religious landscape, long a defining cultural force, is changing. For example, from 2007 to 2014, six percent more people identified themselves as "unaffiliated" with any religion. At the same time the number of people identifying themselves as Christians in the U.S. dropped eight percent according to a Pew Research Foundation [report](#).
- According to a [report](#) by The Conference Board, only about 48 percent of people are satisfied with their jobs, compared to 61 percent in 1987.

This is just a sample, of course, but it demonstrates a number of fronts where things are changing. Regardless of where you stand on any of these shifts, the fact is, any change can make people feel somewhat lost and uncertain of the future. But since each generation was raised with a different ethos, these shifts impact them differently.

Generation X: A Successful Career is a Good Life

Generation X, those people born between 1965 and 1980, largely came from divorced families. These were the latchkey kids who essentially raised themselves. Many of them grew up with the idea that happiness comes from putting your head down and getting to work. They believed that when they were successful, they would be happy. Afraid of replicating their parents' broken marriages, they delayed marriage and family until they hit that magical benchmark. And for some, it never came.

For others, they reached their financial goals, looked around and asked: "Is this all there is? I thought it would be better, be more." They're not the new kids on the block any more; in fact the first batch of them turned 50 in 2015. However cutting edge they were when they entered the workforce, their level of comfort with tech is likely far behind the Millennials in the workforce now. Gen Xers also see the Millennials choosing

careers they can get passionate about, embracing entrepreneurship and eschewing material possessions in favor of experiences, and they wonder: Should I take that route? Is it too late?

One great example is a Gen X client, a financial analyst who never married and has been saving money like crazy for decades. She took a sabbatical in Southeast Asia for six weeks and it transformed her life. She thought: These people have no money. They're living in homes with dirt floors. But they're happy." She had pushed herself to the top of the mountain where she had been told happiness was, only to find it wasn't there. Then she came to me.

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Another client has been working for a major cell phone carrier for nearly 30 years and is realizing that the path he's been treading toward success no longer exists. In a matter of years his job will be done by robots or software and he had no backup plan.

Whether someone is alone in this place or has a partner or family, it's challenging. Historically, these are a person's top earning years—not necessarily so anymore. If someone has a family, with young kids, making a career pivot at this point can threaten their financial security which doesn't always go over real well. If they don't have a family, seeking a partner while you're drifting about looking for a direction feels like a recipe for disaster. Just realizing that money doesn't buy happiness doesn't tell you where to look for it next. And Gen Xers still need to make a living.

Baby Boomers: Shouldn't I Be On a Beach Somewhere?

Then there are people in their 50s, 60s and 70s. News reports from recent years show that this group, which used to envision itself sliding comfortably into retirement, possibly on a private island, are instead committing suicide at twice the rate they used to. They feel like the world has changed so much they can't find how they fit in it anymore. They can't afford to retire, and really, they don't want to. But no one wants to hire them, partly because of the perception that they're unwilling to adapt.

Before I take this argument too far, let me express that many Baby Boomers have no intention of committing suicide, are perfectly willing to change and adapt and are, in fact, early adopters. I'm one. But in many respects, we just operate and think

differently from many Millennials. And it takes a lot of effort on both parts to make the workplace work. Millennials, who are all about diversity, have to include older people as well as those of different faiths and gender preferences in their palettes. And Boomers have to accept the way workplaces are now. The rules they learned about how to work—build a strategy and business plan, wait to adopt a new technology until you see if it takes off, take your place in the hierarchy—simply don't apply anymore. Nobody makes a long term strategy because things change too fast. New technology isn't a long term investment but a stepping stone to the next new technology. And hierarchies are getting flatter and flatter. Groups make decisions. Crowd sourcing and inclusion have replaced formal structures. For Baby Boomers who hoped to put in their time and skate out before the workplace became unrecognizable, well...tough break. For Boomers, choosing a new direction includes preparing to rearrange their ideas about what a workplace should be while also bringing forward valuable lessons they've learned from their own careers that are still applicable.

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So how do all these people begin thinking about transitioning their careers for happiness? The hurdles may be different, but the methodology is the same.

Make Way for Robots

Anyone looking at a career change right now has to have a forward-looking perspective. Where are things going? What tasks can be easily done by robots, software and other technologies and which require a distinctly human touch of empathy and creativity? The fact is, a lot of jobs are no longer for humans. We've all watched the robots take over manufacturing but now it stretches all the way to service and creative jobs. Airport kiosks can check you in and issue you a boarding pass, even verify your credentials before you get on the plane. Checkers are being replaced by self-check stations. Some hotels have robots bring you your extra towels and robot journalists are now being employed to write stories and commercial content. Nearly everything you want done can be done by self service, and many Generation X and Millennials prefer it that way. They'd rather buy the item online than do the song and dance with a sales person. For that matter, they'd rather pay to ride in a car that drives itself than buy their own vehicles. Whatever industry you're in or are interested in, it's wise to look at what future is predicted in terms of job apportionment for humans and for robots.

Who You Know

After years of helping people pivot their careers I can say this with complete confidence: Your social and professional networks are the most important piece of any career change. Who do you know in the industry you're interested in? Who do you know at the company where you want to work? Who do you know who has connections with these kinds of people? A number of companies, including LinkedIn and Facebook's new professional pages have been built to capitalize on the power of human networks.

In 1973, sociologist Mark Granovetter wrote a paper entitled "The Strength of Weak Ties" in which he argued that connections between people who didn't know one another well might be more powerful than those among close friends or family, in some ways. The reason is that when you know someone well, you know their weaknesses, tendencies and inclinations and can weigh their opinion through that lens. But if several people you don't know well all recommend the same book, you're more likely to be

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influenced by that. People still study Granovetter's theory because it has become more and more important in this age of social media. Your ties to people in your network, even those who are not close to you, may have more impact on your future than you can imagine. For example, many of us have people we knew 20 years ago who think well of us and who have landed in completely

new industries with entirely new networks that we could tap into. But we rarely think of them when we're looking for a new opportunity. Those are precisely the kinds of weak ties Granovetter was talking about.

No one makes a change without help. It takes connections, supporters, a tribe to help you transition from one place to the next. And one positive benefit to the changing world is access to information about who might be members of that tribe.

Know Thyself

You, of course, are the most important person to know. Do you even know what your talents are? What makes you love one job and not another? Do you know how to describe the kinds of environments that put you "in the zone" from a work perspective? People tend to look at jobs from the perspective of salary and benefits but there are so

many other things that matter. Like your commute, and what the office is like.

For many people, the focus isn't on what they do, but who their teams are. As long as they connect to the people around them, they can be happy in any job.

Other people need a certain level of stasis or change. I had a client who realized that one of her biggest drawbacks was that she would rapidly become unhappy in a job. This caused a lot of problems when she was hired to do one thing and, six months or a year later, she was still doing it and hating it more and more. We realized she needed a lot of change. She was happy figuring out how to solve a problem and training others how to do the work that needed doing to keep the

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organizational machinery running, but then she needed a new challenge. Making that part of her job search and negotiations was the key to finding a position that worked for her.

Another client loved cleaning up messes. If some department was a catastrophe, some process outdated, some management system dysfunctional he would go in and find solutions, clean it up and get it all running smoothly. But after that, he was bored. He needed a career where cleaning up messes was his job.

No matter how lucrative, high-status or secure a job may be, if it doesn't fit who you are it will be a gilded cage. You have to find the work that fulfills you as an individual while making enough money for you to live on according to your own standards. That requires a process. There are a lot of moving parts, a lot of mental, emotional and lifestyle shifts, and a lot of decisions about what's really MOST important to your happiness and success.

Making a change isn't an overnight task. You took time to get yourself where you are and perfect your current way of thinking and operating and it will take time to learn to think and function in a different way. It will take time to learn yourself and to cultivate the skills needed to pivot to the work that suits you best. It's worth it.