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Leaving Work
Managing One of Life's
Pivotal Transitions

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT



Leaving Work: Managing One of Life's Pivotal Transitions
by *James R. Nininger*

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Preface

Human resource issues are a cornerstone of The Conference Board of Canada's program in organizational performance. Recent publications deal with topics such as the ageing workforce, recruitment, retention, and work-life balance. This report addresses the issue of retirement and its impact on individuals and organizations.

Over the next decade, Canada will experience a hitherto unprecedented rate of retirement. Seminars intended to prepare employees for this new phase of their lives focus primarily on financial planning. Yet, as this report indicates, preparation encompasses far more than that and extends to organizations, as well.

It is most appropriate that James R. Nininger is the author of this report. As the recently retired President and CEO of The Conference Board of Canada, his personal experience of the transition from work to life beyond work, and his often deep-rooted contacts with the many executives he has interviewed make for a report that is both a testament to the depth of the experience and a wake-up call for better preparation.

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About the Author

James R. Nininger retired from The Conference Board of Canada in 2001, after serving for 23 years as President and CEO. He wishes to express his appreciation to the Conference Board for assisting him in making the study possible. Research Associate Nicole Wassink provided research support early in this study. He would also like to thank the Canadian Centre for Management Development (CCMD), the leadership institution of the federal government, where he is currently a Visiting Fellow, for making his continued work on the study possible. At the CCMD, he has had the valuable assistance of Linda Scourtoudis, who has worked with him in the capacity of Research Assistant on the project. Finally, he would like to thank all of those whose transition experiences have made this study possible. In addition to other publications for the Conference Board and the CCMD, Dr. Nininger is working on a book of the results of the study. He can be reached at jrnininger@rogers.com

Leaving Work: Managing One of Life's Pivotal Transitions

A significant number of employees will be taking retirement over the course of the next five to ten years. As a society, we are getting older, and more and more people are opting to leave the workforce early. In the wake of this development, individuals will face choices about how they wish to spend their life beyond the workforce, and organizations will have to learn how best to cope without the expertise of their most mature workers.

It appears, however, that we are not preparing ourselves or our organizations for the impact of this upcoming human resource movement.

This report explores the results of a research study on senior executives who have made, or were about to make, the sometimes uneasy transition from work to life after work—that period that we traditionally label “retirement.” Its primary focus is on the individual transition from work to doing other things, but it also explores the role of organizations in facilitating this transition and touches on steps they might take to minimize the impacts.

Retirement is something that does not come naturally to everyone. Research shows that about one-third of people have some trouble adjusting to it. One resounding message comes through from the 90 senior executives and 20 experts in the field of retirement and life transitions who were interviewed for this study: those who do manage to retire successfully are those who have prepared themselves—and those closest to them—for the transition.

Six key life lessons, which are vital to making that transition a successful one, emerged from the interviews. They apply not only to executives, but to us all.

1. View retirement as a journey, not a destination.
2. Get a life while you are still working.
3. Be prepared for leaving—it happens sooner or later.
4. Cut yourself some slack after leaving.
5. Renew and rediscover relationships on your journey.
6. Make the most of this phase of your life.

This report suggests that organizations can and should do more to help their employees with this pivotal transition. Preparation for retirement should be an integral part of human resource planning. Organizations would best help their employees—and themselves—by offering options to employees as they prepare to leave. These could include sabbaticals, reduced work weeks, special end-of-career assignments in the last year or so of a person's career, phased retirements, alumni programs for those who wish to stay connected and leave a legacy, and perhaps even assistance in beginning to network with volunteer organizations where one can continue to apply one's strengths and vision after retirement from the primary career. These options help not only the employee, but also the organization in managing the critical issue of knowledge transfer.

Ultimately, however, the transition is a personal one. The vast majority of the senior executives interviewed for this study made successful transitions—and they have valuable lessons and best practices to offer us. Research suggests that when we contemplate such a major life change—just as when we consider important business decisions—it is imperative that we invest some time and plan wisely for it.

Introduction

Retirement—that often longed for and sometimes greatly feared period that follows time spent in the workforce—is looming or is a reality for many Canadians. In an ageing society such as ours, retirement will become increasingly common. Over the course of the next five to ten years, many organizations will be losing significant percentages of their experienced workforce, assuming that the rate at which they have been retiring continues.

For example, by December 2010, 44 per cent of governments' workforce—federal, provincial/territorial and municipal—will be eligible to leave the workplace.¹

And the odds are that retirees will remain in that phase of their lives for a long time because more people are living longer and the average retirement age is decreasing. Men now live to an average age of 76 and women to 82.²

Leaving work in your early fifties means you have about one-third of your life to live—beyond the workplace. One chief executive officer who left his job at the age of 51 said, “I will be retired for as long as I have worked.” This is the new historical context of retirement.

Many organizations will soon be losing significant percentages of their experienced workforce.

These facts have important implications for both individuals and organizations, who will clearly be affected by this development. It is timely, therefore, to look at the whole issue of retirement.

Other Conference Board studies have examined the organizational implications of major demographic and labour force changes.³ This paper focuses on the individual transition from work to doing other things. It reveals the results of a research study on senior executives who had made, or were about to make, the

transition from work to retirement. The paper provides an overview of the lessons that have emerged from an analysis of the interviews with them. The six “life lessons” apply not only to senior executives; they are lessons for us all as we struggle to juggle our priorities and plan as best we can for the future.

Someone who is well prepared will have a greater chance of successfully retiring.

Ultimately, retirement represents a personal transition that is not necessarily easy. Studies show that up to 30 per cent have difficulties⁴—some of which are quite serious—in adjusting to retirement. They show that individuals who are the most susceptible to facing difficulty with the retirement transition are those who:

- view work as central to their identity and have few activities outside of work;
- are not flexible in dealing with change;
- remain psychologically attached to their former jobs;
- are highly committed to work and have not been able to achieve their work-related goals;
- experience forced retirement; or
- are in poor health or have inadequate income levels.

One study that focused on executives indicates that this group may have even greater adjustment difficulties.⁵ Adjustment problems vary, but include denial, fear, boredom, feelings of uselessness, stress, physical illness, depression, and, in extreme cases, suicidal tendencies and death.⁶

Someone who is well prepared will have a greater chance of successfully negotiating the transition. But few organizations are helping to prepare their staff for a successful retirement. Courses offered by human resource departments often focus only on the financial aspects of retirement. They generally ignore or merely touch on issues that relate to the whole person, such as the importance of work–life balance, of having well-developed interests, an all-embracing attitude to

lifelong learning, friends, family, and a sense of community, all of which are vital to successfully negotiating such a sea change in their life.

Organizations will need to be concerned about having the right strategies, policies, and programs in place to deal with this major workforce transition. In addition to preparing their departing staff for the upcoming

change in their lives well ahead of their departure, organizations would also do well to consider how they will replace staff, manage the critical issue of knowledge transfer, and decide whether it would be in their best interests to offer to willing retiring staff the option of part-time work, end-of-career assignments, or the opportunity to act as mentors.

ABOUT THIS STUDY: A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Genesis of the Study

About a year and a half before I was to retire from my position as CEO of The Conference Board of Canada, I started to think seriously about what I would do next. I had reservations about leaving and was not sure of what I wanted to do. I talked to a number of people who had made, or were about to make, a similar transition. I learned that this transition was not necessarily an easy one and that a significant number of people have problems, some quite serious.

To better understand this issue, and to learn why there are differences in the transition to what is called retirement, I decided to undertake a research study focusing on senior executives. I thought that these individuals, so obviously successful in their careers, might have skills and insights that they would apply to the work of transition.

Methodology

Over the course of a year, I interviewed some 90 individuals—both male and female—who had retired or were about to do so. They included CEOs and vice-presidents in the private sector, deputy ministers and assistant deputy ministers in the public sector, and senior executives in a number of other organizations, such as hospitals and educational institutions. In a number of cases, I also interviewed their partners. The sample is not random. These are people I came to know in my years at the Conference Board. In addition, I conducted interviews with a further 20 individuals who are experts in the field of retirement, in particular, and life transitions in general, and as well, undertook a review of the research literature.

The interview questions examined the process leading to retirement, the actual transition, and subsequent experiences.

Although the sample for this study consists of senior executives, comments received from participants at a variety of presentations, a review of the literature, and discussions with specialists in the field lead me to believe that the lessons that have emerged from the interviews are universal.

1 Cowan, Allison, Carolyn Farquhar and Judith MacBride-King, *Building Tomorrow's Public Service Today: Challenges and Solutions in Recruitment and Retention* (Ottawa: The Conference Board of Canada, 2002).

2 *Statistics Canada Daily*, May 7, 2002.

3 Murphy, Steven A., *What to Do Before the Well Runs Dry: Managing Scarce Skills* (Ottawa: The Conference Board of Canada, 2000). Cowan, Allison, Carolyn Farquhar and Judith MacBride-King, *Building Tomorrow's Public Service Today: Challenges and Solutions in Recruitment and Retention* (Ottawa: The Conference Board of Canada, 2002). Wassink, Nicole, *Situational Analysis: Your Workforce Is Ageing . . . Are You Ready?* (Ottawa: The Conference Board of Canada, 2001).

4 See, for example, Bossé, Raymond, Carolyn M. Aldwin, Michael R. Levenson and Kathryn Workman-Daniels, "How Stressful Is Retirement? Findings from the Normative Aging Study," *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*, vol. 46, no.1 (1991) pp. 9–14.

5 Hall, Harold R., (for Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University), *Some Observations on Executive Retirement*. (Massachusetts: The Andover Press Ltd., 1953). A thoughtful and more recent book related to this topic is Jeffrey Sonenfeld's (of the Harvard Business School) *The Hero's Farewell: What Happens When CEOs Retire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

6 See, for example, Marshall, Victor, Philippa J. Clark and Peri Ballantyne, "Instability in the Retirement Transition: Effects on Health and Well-Being in a Canadian Study," *Research on Aging*, vol. 23, no. 44 (2001), pp. 379–409.

The Six Lessons: What Have We Learned?

What helpful lessons can we learn from executives who have made this important life transition? Based on interviews with them, there are six key ones.

1. View retirement as a journey, not a destination.
2. Get a life while you are still working.
3. Be prepared for leaving—it happens sooner or later.
4. Cut yourself some slack after leaving.
5. Renew and rediscover relationships on your journey.
6. Make the most of this phase of your life.

These lessons come to life when they are applied to people. The richness of this study lies therein—in the actual life stories that people have graciously shared. The stories of four of them have been summarized and written up as case studies. The stories appear at the end of the report and are referenced throughout the paper.

Three caveats:

- Although the lessons are presented separately, it is clear that they are linked and should be read in this way. As well, they are not listed in any order or priority and do not need to be followed sequentially.
- None of the lessons deal with the important aspect of financial planning.
- This report is about individuals who chose to leave full-time work on their own terms later in their career to do other things. Not everyone wants to do this—some people continue to work full-time until quite late in their lives—and some do not get the opportunity to leave on their own terms due to organizational changes, or for health or other reasons. Some people also leave, but later return to work. The study deals only with the first type of departure.

LESSON 1: VIEW RETIREMENT AS A JOURNEY, NOT A DESTINATION

The interviews indicate that viewing retirement as one part of a lifelong journey tends to facilitate the transition. Alternatively, viewing retirement as a destination can lead to difficulties.

Our society does not encourage us to think of retirement as a journey. In fact, we don't know quite what to make of it or what to expect. Why the confusion and ambiguity?

- **New concept.** Retirement as a concept and social institution is relatively new—it has only been with us for the past 50 years. In an earlier era, life expectancy was shorter and so, for many, the end of work often coincided with the end of life. This is no longer the case.
- **End of work, end of life?** Although many people know of someone who dies shortly after he/she retires, no study has found that the act of retiring is correlated with mortality. As well, an analysis of pension data does not show a high incidence of death upon retirement. For example, work carried out by the Treasury Board of Canada for this study shows that those federal public servant pensioners who died between April 1996 and March 1998 received an average length of pension payments of 16.4 years.¹
- **Over-identifying with work.** For some people, work is the main focus of their lives, and they invest almost their entire identity in it. When their work ends, for all intents and purposes, their lives end.
- **Stereotypes abound.** Abetted by advertising, stereotypes that promote retirement as a destination leave the mistaken impression that retirement is a time of leisure spent almost entirely on the golf course or beach.

- **Popular expressions demean retirement.** Being “past prime time” or “over the hill” are hardly respectful or dignified terms. They contribute to a sense that a person’s “usefulness” is over.
- **Retirement—it’s a misnomer.** The word doesn’t help. The English word for retirement means withdrawal and backing out. The French word, *retraite*, means retreat. The connotation is clear: something is coming to an end. There is nothing in the word that looks ahead or suggests new beginnings. This is not true for every culture. In Aboriginal cultures, the word for and concept of retirement do not exist. And in some Eastern religions, such as Hinduism, life is viewed in equal stages: learning, working, giving back, and preparing for the next life. There are two full phases of life after work.

The executives interviewed for this research study underscored the point that viewing retirement as part of an overall journey was helpful to them in coming to terms with this new stage of life. Those who were successful were able to:

- **Separate themselves from work.** According to one interviewee, “Work is only part of what I do and who I am, and it always has been. When I stop working, I will simply be able to spend more time on the non-work parts of my life.”
- **View life holistically.** Life is a series of transitions, and the end of work is one of them. All transitions have two things in common: an ending and a beginning. This is true of graduating from school, getting married, or having children. When you leave school, you are nervous and somewhat uncertain about the future and what it will bring. But you are also filled with optimism and excitement. These thoughts and feelings also surround retirement. As one person said, “I graduated from university. Why can’t I graduate from work?”
- **Regard this transition positively.** One interviewee said, “I am retiring *to* something, I am not retiring *from* something.”
- **Anticipate the next phase.** It can be a time of growth and development, of learning and exploring. Some described it as the “gift of time.” “I can do what I want, when I want, where I want, with whom I want.” One person described this phase of life in terms of the “tyranny of time.” He had so much he wanted to do, and time was his limitation. He worried about those who had little to

do, because for them, time was a tyranny of a different nature.

The mindset that one needs to view retirement as a journey came to one senior executive during a coaching course she was taking. “A number of us were worried about the looming end of work. Our instructor told us to think differently: ‘Think of retirement not as a train coming into a station, but as a turn in the road.’ The light went on for me, and this is the way I have been thinking ever since.”

The CEO of a major Canadian company, recently retired, offered an eloquent view of his life as a journey, the place of work in that journey, and his role as the CEO: “I would be depressed if my time [on the job] were the high watermark. People have to see themselves as part of a relay team. Your job is to get the baton into the hands of the next person and get off the track. If you think of it this way, it’s a very natural, peaceful process” (see Case Study 1).

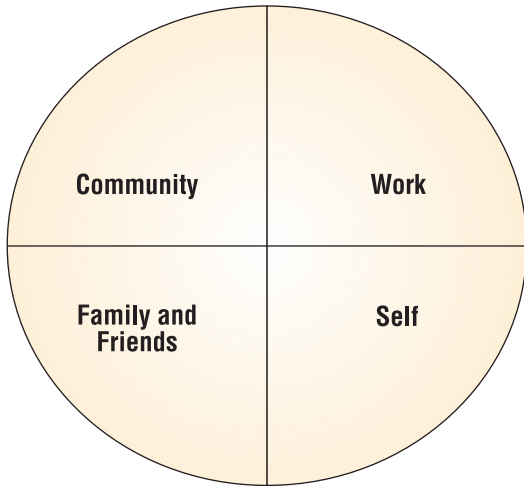
LESSON 2: GET A LIFE WHILE YOU ARE WORKING

The importance of getting a life—maintaining interests and balance—is examined effectively in leadership courses offered by the Center for Creative Leadership in the United States and the Niagara Institute in Canada. Participants are introduced to the concept of “the circle of life,” which has four quadrants. The quadrants represent a different aspect of life, and each person is asked to indicate the amount of time they spend, on average, in each quadrant, namely: time spent at work, time spent on yourself, time on family and friends, and time on community activities (see Exhibit 1). Using this information, course participants are asked to assess their “balance,” identify what changes they would like to make, and determine how they would go about doing this.

Interviewees in this study were asked to provide an assessment of their balance during the latter part of their careers in terms of the “circle of life” framework. Here are the main conclusions from the interviewees on this issue:

- *The majority felt they did not have sufficient diversity in their lives.* As one CEO who headed the Canadian subsidiary of a global company said, “My company owned me body and soul, 24/7. It was brutal.”

Exhibit 1
Circle of Life



Source: The Center for Creative Leadership.

- *The remainder felt that they had achieved relatively good balance in their lives.* One executive vice-president of a Canadian-based international company commented, “In spite of the incredible pressures of my job, I was able to maintain good balance in my life. This is because for me life is about more than work and I had many interests, which I actively pursued. And these interests were

not something I developed later in my career. They were an important part of my overall life plan.”

- *A number of those who were satisfied with their balance stressed the importance of getting practice, early on, at things that would later become their main activities.* They pointed out that it is difficult to start new things in later life. By the time we reach, say 60, we are who we are. This does not mean that one can’t learn new things later in life—and many do, but it’s easier to establish patterns and hone skills earlier on. These people said that attaining balance involved choices and trade-offs around work. These trade-offs, while challenging, were not that difficult if one’s overall goals were clear.
- *A number of those who managed to achieve good balance volunteered the point that they always took their annual holidays.* They claimed that it was essential to take vacation every year, and they had little patience with those who would not because of the pressure of work. Taking holidays leads to healthy, better-rounded, and more productive employees and is one significant way to practise for retirement.
- *A number of interviewees who expressed satisfaction with the balance in their lives while working seemed to have a good sense of themselves and their lives.* They appeared to know themselves. They talked about a life plan and about interests and activities that had

ORGANIZATIONAL ROLE OR RESPONSIBILITY

A question asked of all those interviewed probed whether the respondents felt that their organizations had either a role or a responsibility in helping people with their transition from work. Almost everyone felt that organizations had no *responsibility* because planning for retirement is an individual matter. About 75 per cent said the organization had a *role* to play, and most referred to retirement seminars, which are offered to employees in most organizations.

But there may be a reason for thinking that organizations could play a larger role. Developmental theorists propose that parents deliberately provide structured tasks and supports for children’s step-by-step acquisition of social, intellectual, and practical skills, referring to this as “scaffolding.” So, whether holding the hands of a toddler trying to walk, putting training wheels on a child’s bicycle, or encouraging a youth just starting to think about work to take on a paper route, the scaffolding protects the learner from failure and is gradually taken down over time as competence increases.¹

Transferring this model to the context of the organization, scaffolding is provided to new employees through orientation, graded tasks, initial assessment of performance, mentoring, job rotation, and training and development. The scaffolding is largely absent, however, at the end of a career and the transition into retirement, which for everyone is a new life experience. How do people know what to do with the rest of their lives if they have had little practice in planning it and testing the workability of those plans?

It would seem that an investment in some kind of scaffolding, which would act as preparation and practice for those leaving the organization for a different life stage, would be worthwhile for the organization in the emerging era of large numbers of departures. It would show other employees that the organization cares about the transition at the end of a career as well as transition into a career. As well, it could be of assistance in facilitating knowledge transfer.

Examples of scaffolding initiatives can include special assignments in the last year or so of a person’s career, phased retirements and working less than full time towards the end of a career, alumni programs for those who wish to stay connected and leave a legacy, and perhaps even assistance in beginning to network with volunteer organizations where one can continue to apply one’s strengths and vision after retirement from the primary career.

1 Wood, D.J., J.S. Bruner, and G. Ross, “The Role of Tutoring in Problem-Solving,” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, no. 17 (1976), pp. 89–100.

been lifelong pursuits. They seemed to be able to visualize how their lives would evolve, and they knew what they wanted to do along the way. These things are vital to making a fulfilling transition.

- *Many who commented on lack of diversity discussed this in terms of the issue of work–life balance.* The demands of work were such that simply surviving the double demand of work and personal life too often seemed to be the first priority. The issue of balance haunts the minds of many executives, both men and women. This has been clearly demonstrated by a significant body of research carried out by The Conference Board of Canada. It is an area that requires ongoing monitoring, as the consequences of imbalance can be significant.² It can lead to valued employees leaving work altogether, as was the case for a number of the persons interviewed for this study (see Case Study 2).

The key message of this lesson is that people need to step back periodically to assess where they are with respect to balance in life. The “circle of life” framework is a useful tool for this. It is all too easy to get caught up in work, and we know that work is not going to slow down to accommodate us in our search for a better balance. It is up to us to take the necessary steps to live our lives in a way that feels right to us.

People need to step back periodically to assess where they are with respect to balance in life.

It is particularly important to give proper consideration to the quadrant devoted to spending time on ourselves. Many of the interviewees lamented that they did not do enough here. This quadrant encompasses physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. It includes interests and hobbies and other pursuits. The research on activity development is worth noting. One authoritative researcher, who has written extensively on the subject of ageing, has concluded that the development of activity competencies early in life is the best way to ensure that we have such activities later in life.³

LESSON 3: BE PREPARED FOR LEAVING—IT HAPPENS SOONER OR LATER

The reality for most of us is that retirement is inevitable and that it represents one of life’s important

transitions. And the research is clear—planning leads to better transitions. The research shows that two aspects are particularly important: deciding when and how to leave, and deciding what to do in the next chapter of life. Yet most of us do very little planning. Why is this so?

Here are some reasons offered by the interviewees:

- Retirement is too far off: “It’s off in the future, so I don’t need to think about it for some time.”
- Denial: “It happens to other people, not me.”
- Planning is hard work, so it gets postponed in order to deal with the immediate pressures of work.
- Planning for retirement is a solitary activity. It is something we must do alone, which is quite different from the planning we do at work, almost all of which takes place in team settings.
- Many people have no idea what they want to do in retirement, thus they don’t want to think about it.

Interviewees offered some suggestions to consider in planning departures. These included planning long in advance, always having a plan ready, knowing when to leave, leaving on your own terms—in a season of your own choosing—and discussing your departure with your partner.

Many respondents suggested that people should practise working at a different pace at some point during or towards the end of their career. The interviews indicated that this happens more in the public sector and includes sabbaticals, special end-of-career assignments, and reduced work weeks. Those who took advantage of these opportunities felt they were very helpful in facilitating the change from a high-pressure work environment to retirement. Said one executive, “The flow of our lives from school through our working years is achievement oriented, moving upward, working long hours, and working under pressure. You develop a rhythm for this type of life, and when you stop working, you need to develop a new rhythm.”

When the actual time comes to make a decision on leaving, executives stressed that it was important to consider the season of departure and how it affects you emotionally. Some preferred the late spring with its sense of new beginnings; others chose the freedom of summer with the many sports activities it offers. Yet others liked the more robust seasons of fall and winter.

Interviewees prepared themselves—consciously or unconsciously—for departure in a variety of ways. Some people just watched and observed how others did it. Others spent time talking to those who had made the transition. Many people took retirement seminars. But the persons interviewed commonly observed that they should have taken the seminars earlier in the game and that the seminars did not focus on the whole person.

Three people interviewed for the study who did not undertake any preparation time became seriously ill after they retired (see Case Study 3). Each attributed their illness to the fact that they were highly involved with their jobs to the exclusion of almost everything else and had not planned effectively for their departure and the next phase of life.

Investing time in preparation for retirement appears to be a most worthwhile—and necessary—pursuit.

LESSON 4: CUT YOURSELF SOME SLACK AFTER LEAVING

Retirement is a time of transition. It is a turning point, and a time of growth. Between the end of work and the beginning of a new phase of life lies what one writer, William Bridges, has called “the neutral zone.”

The neutral zone is a buffer phase, and it is important both physically and psychologically. Most of us have been working flat out with long days, weeks, months, and years, and our bodies need time to adjust to the new reality. The same is true of our minds. Many executives are exhausted after work and need time to adjust.

Not one interviewee disagreed with the need for down time after leaving work.

Our society does not hold “down time” in high esteem. Taking a break is generally not something that comes naturally to us, and we often feel guilty doing so. Bridges feels that “we have lost our appreciation for this gap in the continuity of existence. Because there is a void, we rush to fill it with activity. We are not used to taking time out to be by ourselves and to reflect on what has gone by and what is coming next.”⁴

Not one interviewee disagreed with the need for a neutral zone. Most felt they had spent some time there. Some said they should have been there longer.

Here is what some executives did:

- *Took an extended trip after leaving.* These were for periods of from two to four months, and longer, and they tended to be far away from home. They were designed to get away from familiar sights and sounds, to bring about a change of scenery.
- *Undertook major projects such as renovations.* They did this to refocus their energies away from work.
- *Refused to take on too much, too soon.* There is a tendency to accept invitations to various groups or to undertake projects too early in the neutral zone. This can be caused by a fear of being forgotten or of not having anything to do.
- *Did not definitively answer the question “What are you going to do now?”* There seems to be a self-imposed pressure to respond to the most superficially polite inquiry with something meaningful: “I’m taking on the challenge of world hunger after a brief holiday!” In fact, it’s okay to say, “I don’t know.”
- *Wrote their autobiography.* A number of those interviewed said they used their neutral zone to write an autobiography. They had no intention of publishing it, but they wanted to spend some time reflecting on their lives and setting it down on paper. The experience, they said, was exhilarating.

Retirees need to replace co-workers with new friends with whom they can enjoy leisurely pursuits.

Time spent in the neutral zone is not unproductive. It is like earth lying fallow, resting to be productive again. Bridges calls it a time of “attentive inactivity.”⁵

LESSON 5: RENEW AND REDISCOVER RELATIONSHIPS ON YOUR JOURNEY

FRIENDS AND FAMILY COUNT

Research in this area is very clear: social support is essential to health and well-being. A variety of studies conclude that people with better social ties live longer than those who have few or poor quality social ties.⁶ A seminal 1979 study reported that of

6,928 adults between the ages of 30 and 69, those with the lowest level of social contact had mortality rates up to 4.5 times higher than those with strong social support.⁷

A 2002 study examined the impact of social support and changes in social support on mortality and on coronary heart disease in a large sample of men. It found that men with little social support had an 82 per cent higher risk of dying from heart disease than less socially connected men.⁸

The interviews conducted for the current study indicate how difficult it is for senior executives to maintain meaningful networks of social contacts during their working careers. Said one, “The pressures of my job meant that I simply did not have time for my friends. Since retiring, I have come to realize how important friends are, and I have spent a considerable amount of time rebuilding my friendships.”

There were distinct gender differences in this area. The women who were interviewed tended to spend more time on their social connections and thus had a large set of friends when they moved into retirement. Research confirms this conclusion.⁹ Women’s networks tend to be larger, less homogeneous, and more intimate. Men tend to rely more heavily on their spouses for support. Women act as best friends for both men and other women and give more emotional support than men do. Men tend to have more acquaintances, whereas women tend to have more confidants.

The study suggests that well-being depends primarily on the quality of support one has and not on the quantity of relationships.

Social networks are like concentric circles that express differences in proximity to an individual. The inner circle represents the most intimate relationships, such as those with spouses or partners, close relatives and friends; the intermediate circle represents other friends, relatives, and confidants at work; the outer circle represents less intimate friends, relatives, co-workers, spouse’s friends and neighbours. This conceptualization suggests that social networks can remain stable or change during major life transitions.¹⁰ One study found that in retirement, the inner circle does not

change much in terms of quantity and quality until later in life. But change does take place in the other two circles (see Exhibit 2), and as co-workers tend to disappear, they need to be replaced by new friends with whom the retiree can enjoy leisurely pursuits. The study suggests that although changes in the quantity of social networks occur over time, well-being depends primarily on the quality of support one has and not on the quantity of relationships.¹¹

Many individuals in this study commented that they were not going to miss their work, but that they would miss their colleagues in the workplace. Over time, these co-workers, or most of them, will need to be replaced by other friendships.

A number of interviewees, mostly men, commented on the “investment” that they were now making in building up and then maintaining their friendships with former, or new, friends. One senior executive said, “I shouldn’t have waited until I retired to rebuild my social relationships.”

YOUR PARTNER—A KEY SOURCE OF SUPPORT

The marital relationship is usually at the core of a person’s social network. Historically, wives adjusted to the husband’s retirement. Today, for those who are married or living together, retirement is a couples’ phenomenon.

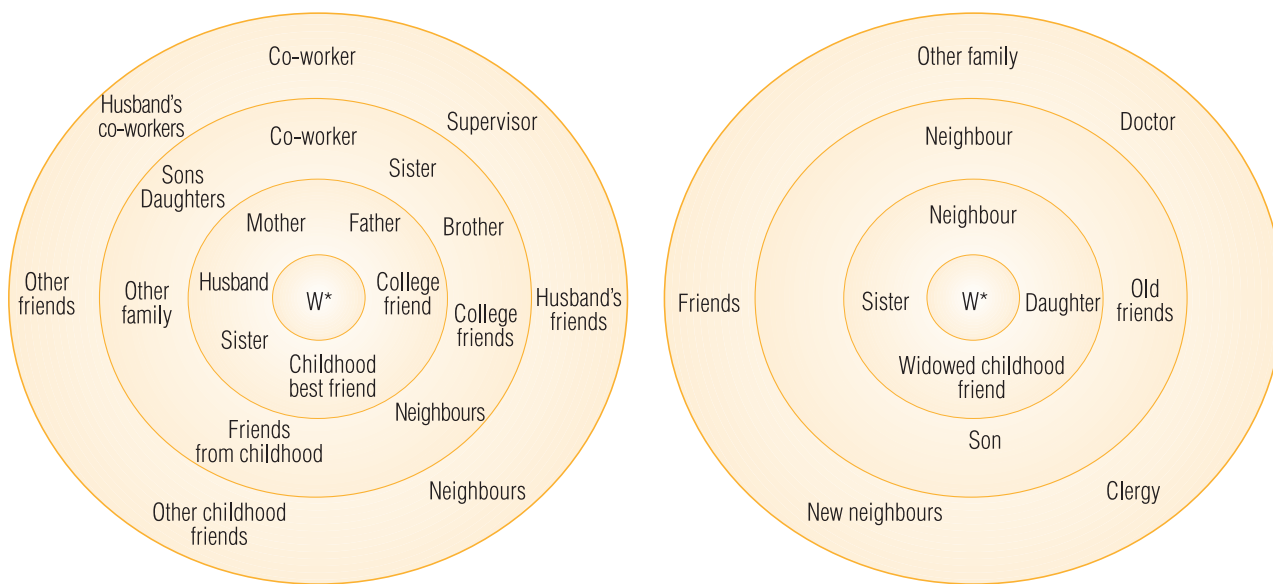
Research has found that the *retirement transition* causes declines in marital quality in the short term (in the first two years) but actually *being retired* (more than two years) is linked with higher marital quality.¹² In other words, issues arise around *becoming* retired as opposed to *being* retired. One large study found that in asynchronous retirement, retired spouses reported a 90 per cent increase in marital conflict. This conflict seems to be greater when the husband retires first. For most, the strain is temporary, and couples usually return to previous levels of marriage quality within two years.¹³

The degree of success in the adjustment seems to be related to the following:

- The couple had talked about the anticipated retirement well in advance and discussed how they would live their lives in retirement.
- The person retiring had a variety of interests that allowed him or her to live a separate life from the spouse.

Exhibit 2

Changing Social Networks Over the Life Course: One Woman's Networks at Two Different Points in Her Life Cycle



*Woman, 35 years old, married, mother with two children.

*Same woman, as a 75-year-old widow, with two adult children.

Source: Adapted from Kahn, R.L., and T.C. Antonucci, "Convoys over the Life Course: Attachment, Roles, and Social Support," in Baltes, P.B. and O.G. Brim, Jr., (eds.), *Life-Span Development and Behavior* (New York: Academic Press, 1980).

Not one person who was interviewed said that they could make this transition alone. "Should the spouse support the retiring partner, or should he/she leave them on their own?" asked one executive. His opinion is that "If the partner does not support [retirement] completely, it will cause problems and the relationship may even fail."

LESSON 6: MAKE THE MOST OF THIS PHASE OF YOUR LIFE

One CEO gave this advice to a colleague who was retiring: "You've spent the major part of your life in the service of your organization. Your job now is to spend the rest of your life in the service of you." This is what this lesson is all about.

The interviews revealed wide differences in how people view this phase of their lives, adjust to retirement, and select the activities in which they wish to engage. Some individuals clearly find the transition easier than others.

There was one group of interviewees who spoke of their transition as being very natural and smooth. They seemed to know who they were, and were clear on their goals and what they wanted to do. Without necessarily

speaking about it, they seemed to be clear about their purpose in life, what was important to them, and how they wanted to spend their time.

One said, "I couldn't wait until I retired. I had so many things that I had to get to. I recall that leaving was like a magnet pulling me to my new life. I have many passions that I am now pursuing and everything is unfolding as I wanted it to." When asked about his passions, it turned out that many of them related to things he had done as a youth.

Another in this group commented, "I always had a clear idea of how my life would unfold. Work was an important part of my life, but it was by no means the only or the most important part. I have led a diverse life with a lot of interests. My transition was very smooth because I knew how I wanted to spend my time and what I wanted to do."

To make the most of this time, other interviewees spoke of investing time thinking about their future and developing their plans. One spent an extensive amount of time reading books that dealt with purpose in life. And after thinking about these ideas and developing his

own vision of what was important to him, he had the confidence to move forward.

One individual took a very rational approach. “One of the things I found very useful,” he said, “was to make a list of all the things that during my life had been very important to me. I realized that for most of these things, my career had minimized them rather than maximized them. This started to shape my attitudes towards retirement. I could spend time pursuing the things that I loved. I soon realized that it was possible for me to design a totally different environment from the one that I had.”

The interviews revealed wide differences in how people view retirement, adjust to it, and choose the activities in which they wish to engage.

Others found that discussing their situation with someone was helpful. This ranged from simple conversations with those who had been through such a transition to more extensive explorations involving a coach. This type of assistance—helping you see a future for yourself that might not be readily apparent—is similar to the service provided by outplacement firms that deal with individuals who have lost their jobs.

So what do people actually do when they stop working full time? They do a great diversity of things. And one way of examining this diversity is through the “circle of life” diagram and its four segments (see Exhibit 1).

- **Work.** Most individuals devoted some of their time to paid work. This could include serving on boards of directors, acting as a consultant, or working part-time in an advisory capacity. Some chose to do this for income purposes, but just as often they did it to remain active and involved. For the majority of those interviewed, paid work did not tend to exceed 35 per cent to 40 per cent of their available time. Further, the percentage of time spent at paid work tended to decrease over time.
- **Self.** This is a broad category that includes physical well-being through an active exercise program, hobbies, personal development, and travel (alone or with a partner or friends). Research is quite clear on the importance of developing “activity competencies” early in life, as it is challenging to develop new interests as we get older. In this

regard, it was interesting to note that the interests that many of the interviewees pursued when they retired had been developed early in life (music, cooking, photography, woodworking, reading, investing, etc.) (see Case Study 4).

- **Family and friends.** Many who felt they lacked balance during their working careers indicated that their families had paid the price. It is therefore not surprising that they chose to devote significant time to family and friends. Many spoke about their intention to spend time with grandchildren. In addition, they made the decision to work at rebuilding friendships, which they regarded as a real investment.
- **Community service.** Almost everyone stressed that giving back to one’s community was a high priority for them during their retirement years. According to the American Association of Retired Persons, half of baby boomers plan on participating in community work when they retire.¹⁴ Here again, it is important to lay the groundwork for this by getting practice while working. The majority of business

The study suggests that organizations can and should do more to help their employees with this transition.

people do this by serving on boards or accepting a volunteer position in a non-profit organization at various points during their careers. Many young people do volunteer work during their school years and then resume it later, which is an excellent example of how an activity undertaken earlier in life can become a lifelong interest.¹⁵

The executives in the study had all developed their own way of mapping out where they would spend their time and what their priorities would be. For example, four interviewees (less than 5 per cent) decided that work for pay would no longer be part of their lives. They wanted to devote their time to other priorities. Others said they would do some part-time work for a period of time as a way of adjusting to their new lives. This arrangement is referred to as “phased retirement” or “bridging to retirement.”

In various ways, everyone commented on the freedom they now had to do what they wanted. They regarded this freedom as a wonderful opportunity—a gift to be treasured.

This phase of life is a period of development and learning. As one interviewee said, “I am taking the concept of lifelong learning to heart. I have many areas of interest that I have not had a chance to explore until now, and I am having a ball. Some of the things I am exploring on my own and some I am doing with others. There is no end to the opportunities that I see myself developing.”

CONCLUSION

The fact that approximately one-third of those who retire face difficulties strongly suggests that it is critical to invest time and effort in exploring this pivotal life transition. The vast majority of the senior executives interviewed for this study made successful transitions—and they have valuable lessons and best practices to offer us. Like most important life lessons, these are rooted in careful thinking, sound planning, and skilful execution.

These lessons, as previously noted, are linked and relate to one another. They carry equal weight, are not listed in any order of priority, and do not need to be followed sequentially. For example, while it is never too early for Lesson 3 (Be Prepared for Leaving), it is also never too late for Lesson 6 (Make the Most of This Phase of Your Life).

The study also suggests that organizations can and should do more to help their employees with this transition. Preparation for retirement should be an integral part of human resource planning. Organizations would best help their employees—and themselves—by offering comprehensive seminars on this transition, as well as scaffolding for employees as they prepare to leave their organization.

It is worth noting that this study started out as an examination of retirement, but it evolved into an examination of life itself. When facing a transition such as that from work to life after work, people often find themselves—in one way or another—asking themselves the deep, fundamental question, “Who am I, and what is my life all about?” Ultimately, each one of us will choose unique ways to answer that question, based on how we have lived our lives to date and how we want to live the rest of our lives. Investing some time in answering that question is an investment in our own life potential. What more worthwhile investment could there be?

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Case Studies: Four Transition Experiences

CASE STUDY 1: MICHAEL LAWRENCE*

Michael Lawrence deliberately stepped down from his position as the CEO of a large Canadian-based organization at the age of 60 and left the board of directors at the same time. He simply wanted to do other things. The interview took place at the time of his departure.

When I became CEO I knew that I wanted to stay in the role for no longer than seven years. I wanted to leave by the time I was 60. My view was that I was not the institution. I think some CEOs wrongfully identify themselves and the institution as one and the same. You have to make sure the institution is not your only identity, and people fall into this trap too often.

I have also seen individuals who, when it came close to the time when they really should go, figured out that they should stay, and so they did, probably because they did not want to give up. It also may be because they did not have anything else to do. This is a mistake. You really have to have a plan and stick with it.

I tended to listen to people who had thought about their departure a good deal. Their advice was to pick a date and plan for it. They said that as the date got closer, leaving was like a magnet that was pulling them away. They couldn't wait to get past all of the retirement events and get on with their new lives. Most of the people I have talked with look forward to leaving. They realize that there is a bigger world beyond their job, and they have determined how and where they want to live and what they want to do.

When these people come back to retirement gatherings, they tend to look younger. They seem to look after themselves better. They also seem satisfied being retired and are

happy with their lives. I have not heard many of them say that they wished they were back at work. The other thing they say is that they are amazed at how busy they are.

In my experience, executives are tending to retire a lot earlier in recent years. I do not think that there will be too many executives in our organization who will make it past the age of 60. They will go off and do other things, like sit on corporate and community boards, and do part-time consulting.

I was quite firm about how long I wanted to be in the job. With this in mind, I devoted a lot of time to thinking and planning for my succession and putting the new team in place. This does not just happen, it takes time. I got a great deal of satisfaction out of this.

I felt that I was passing the baton on to people I trusted. We put in place a very strong team and I felt that they would improve on what we had done. I would feel depressed if my time at the helm was the high watermark. If that happened, I would feel that I had failed. People have to see themselves as part of a relay team. If you view it this way, leaving is a very natural process. Your job is to get that baton into the hand of the next person and then get off the track. Leave no shadow.

Another reason that I was firm about leaving had to do with my father, who was 59 when he died. He got sick while he was working and never had a chance to retire. I can remember the things my parents used to talk about doing when my father retired, but they never had a chance to fulfill their plans. I did not want that to happen to me.

Although most of the people I have observed have good transitions, it does not mean that everyone does. I know of one single chap who did not take his holidays, but instead used this time to go to another part of

* a pseudonym

our organization and take on a special assignment. He was a very popular guy and a great trainer and motivational speaker. He loved people. When he finally retired, he went home and literally drank himself to death. I was really sad about this. It was almost as if he had a chemical dependence on our organization, and when he left there was nothing else. I was always a big believer in taking all of your holidays every year, and I pushed others to do the same. This is one way of getting practice at doing other things.

So, one aspect of this transition is about leaving. The other is about what you are going to do next. If you're lucky, you are going to be living a long time. If you have your health, you could live another 20 to 25 years. You need to think of this as a third career and as an opportunity to explore and learn new things.

When I left, I was told that I would need time and space to think things through and that I should not take on a lot of new things. Some people get involved in too many boards, and they find that their schedules are more predetermined than when they were a CEO. As a CEO, you can influence your own schedule, but when you are a director, you can't set the agenda. I am going to limit the number of boards I sit on.

Whatever you are going to do, you have to be close to passionate about it; otherwise you are going to lose interest. The non-business things that I am going to be doing are all things that I am passionate about. I want to pursue interests I've had for a long time, such as music and certain academic explorations that have always intrigued me. And, for sure, travelling will be a priority for my wife and me. We've got a list of places we want to see.

In many ways, the things that I will be doing will be extensions of the things that I did when I was nine or ten. We moved around a lot when I was young, and until I got to know new kids in the neighbourhood or in school, I tended to do things on my own. I got used to this and now feel quite comfortable pursuing solitary

activities. I want to build model airplanes, fish, read, or play a musical instrument. I have all these projects in my head, and I am wondering if I am going to have time for them.

A friend once told me that when you retire, you should make a list of all of the things that you would like to do now that you have unlimited time. Don't do this all at once, but develop the list over time. Apparently, all of the things that you have listed will take you only six months to do. But this won't happen because one thing will lead to the next and you will build on things. I think this is wonderful. So, I don't know exactly what I am going to be doing—and I almost don't want to know.

I did a fair amount of community work throughout my career. When we were younger and raising a family, we were very active in all of the communities we lived in. As I moved up through our organization, I sat on the boards of universities and associations, and helped organize national fundraising campaigns. I like community activities because of the people I meet, the different perspectives they bring, and the learning that always takes place. I think if you work only in your own organization, you don't know enough about what is going on. I don't want to get over-committed with too many voluntary activities, but I definitely will be involved in a few.

I know some people who do not know what they are going to do when they retire, and I think that this is a shame. It's a great time of life. It can be a time of really living, seeing things, and learning new things. People have to find a way of unlocking the future for themselves. One way of doing this is to think back to your early youth because you form your values at this time. Thinking of some of the things that you did when you were on your own and self-sufficient helps you to rediscover your interests. This was true for me, and is why I say that I will never be bored thinking of things I want to do.

CASE STUDY 2: DAN ALEXANDER*

Dan Alexander and his wife, both senior executives in large Canadian companies, made an agreement that, by the time their daughter entered Grade 8, one of them would leave their job in order to spend more time at home. A reorganization gave Alexander the chance to retire, which he did in December 2000, at the age of 54, after a 31-year career with his organization. The interview took place six months after Alexander left his organization.

About a year ago, my wife and I decided that, before our daughter entered Grade 8, one of us would be out of the workforce. Both our jobs demanded travel, a lot of wear and tear and stress, and significant time in terms of pure hours at work. We decided that we didn't really believe that we had good balance as a family. My job was in the field and I had a great deal of autonomy over my time, whereas my wife was in a line management job with less flexibility. So, our thought was that she would leave the workforce first, but it did not work out that way.

There was a great deal of turmoil in my organization, with a change in CEO, and a decline in some of our businesses. We undertook a significant analysis of every department and every position, with the result that there were going to be six fewer executives at my level. I was very candid with my boss and told him that I intended to retire at 55 in any event. My boss wanted me to stay, but said they would need a minimal commitment of three to five years. I could not give this commitment.

In September, we agreed that I would leave but would stay until the end of December to train my successor. This is what I did. I could only have dreamed of a transition as positive as mine. Five years ago, I envisaged myself leaving, and my departure exceeded my expectations by a huge amount.

I started to think of retiring about three or four years ago. It seemed that the treadmill was moving a little more quickly each year and you had to work a little harder to keep up. My wife and I found that being two working parents, both in senior positions, was incredibly demanding. If we had not had a child, it would not have

been as significant. But children grow up so quickly, and we were not willing to sacrifice her youth. By the time she was 18 and we were ready to retire, we could envisage her saying, "I don't really need you now."

I find that many of my friends, once they reach 50 and have been in the workforce for 25 to 30 years, find themselves getting a little more tired of doing the "same old, same old" and want to do something completely different or change the way they spend their time. The satisfaction quotient for many of them has gone down considerably. Because of what I have done, I find myself in many rather profound conversations with my friends. Just four guys having a beer and they start to unload and you realize just how they feel. We all mask it because there is no reason to complain about it. The fact is that we all have responsibilities: everybody gets up, we tote the barge, and that's life—you just do it. But if you get a chance to talk about it, you find out what people really think.

I am absolutely convinced that our friends and associates are typical of many people in mid-to-senior management levels. It seems that as the demands and stress levels go up, the feeling of satisfaction and having balance in life goes down. Business is getting tougher every year. At the end of each year, you look back and then forward, feeling like you had just run the 100-yard dash in record time, but that you would have to get your time down the next year. The fact of the matter is that every year you think that you have worked as hard as you can, but the next year you have to work harder, and this isn't going to change.

Most of our friends are dual working couples. For many, the way they live their lives is not pretty. I know—we did this for too long. You work hard all day, you come home, you don't know who is going to make dinner, you want to help your children with their homework and spend some time with them, but you're wired for sound for two hours after you come home. More of our friends are saying that the quality of their lives is not that great and wonder if this is what it's all about.

One of your goals in life, when you are younger, is to get to a senior management position. You feel, somewhat naively, that once you are there you will be in a position of power, which will give you more control

* a pseudonym

over your time to focus on the things that you most enjoy and give you more time for yourself and your family. The reality is that the more senior the job is, the more demanding it is, and the demand factor seems to go off the scale.

In terms of my own balance, I would have to say that while I was working, I devoted the vast majority of my time to my job. You do things on a day-to-day basis, and, unless there is a crisis, like a funeral or a sick child, your job encompasses a lot of your time. Your family comes next to your job. The thing that gets sacrificed is your personal activities. It is hard to find time for yourself.

I did not do a lot of thinking about what I was going to do immediately after I left work. I just wanted to get more balance in our lives. Our first focus was to get us through the school year with after-school activities, doctor's appointments, homework, and so on. I wasn't thinking of any big projects, but rather about putting food in the fridge and looking after the cleaning. This sounds so mundane. I now have a new respect for what it takes to run a household. Every guy who has a spouse at home and who has not walked in her shoes, should.

My first six months away from work have been pretty relaxing. The winter is a little more difficult because you are not as free and easy to do things as you are in summer. We are fortunate in that we have a cottage and we are very active. I took the opportunity every Wednesday to take a friend of mine to the cottage to snowmobile. I did a lot more skiing and I played hockey. Other people who retired told me that my day would change, and it did. I stopped getting up to work out at 6:00 a.m. I got up with my wife, made her breakfast, and then got our daughter ready for school, and then I would go and work out. I had lunches about three days a week with friends and former business associates.

One question everybody asks me is, "What are you doing with yourself?" The question is fascinating. People would ask what I did when I got up in the morning, what I did in the afternoon, did I get bored and so on. People who ask these questions do so because they either fantasize about being there or are worried about what will happen when their time comes.

The human dynamics regarding this blew me away. I was not prepared for it, and it was fascinating.

The people that I think are the most concerned about retiring are uneasy for one or two reasons. First, some of them do not have many outside interests and they are terrified of not having their job—because that is their life. In fact, it is probably their identity. People who have broad interests in life are more excited about retirement. They talk about volunteer work, taking care of their physical health, or taking up a new interest. The second concern has to do with relationships. My wife and I have observed that some couples have great relationships. They like spending time together and look forward to being able to spend more of it together. Then there are others. They love and respect each other in their own way, but they have no interest in getting up in the morning, spending time with each other, and doing things together. They don't find that exciting. In fact, for every couple in our circle who talks about spending time together in a positive way, there is another who does the opposite.

I am absolutely amazed at how few people have a life plan. We have had one for some time and it includes moving out of the city and living a different lifestyle, getting involved in the community, which is easier to do in the country than it is in the city. It took us 10 years to realize what a different life people lead outside of the city. So, we have always had a plan. I am stunned at how many of our family and friends do not have a clue about where they are going to be in five or ten years. I think they just get overwhelmed by their work, their personal and family responsibilities, and they just get up, put their head down, and keep running down the track. There may be a pipe dream fantasy for them somewhere, but they never really find out what it is.

Looking to the future, I can see getting into some type of consulting work. Two friends have approached me about working with them. The only aspect of consulting that is terrifying is that it is hard to do for only 10 to 20 hours a week. The nature of consulting is that it can be very intense and demanding, and it may actually be a step backward in terms of our goals. My wife and I don't really believe that we are going to have the luxury of total time in our lives until our daughter is in university. We have five years until that happens. Until that time, we've absolutely committed ourselves to trying to live this fantasy where we really do have time to

spend with her, expose her to the things that we would like her to experience, ensure that we are raising her in the fashion we want, and know her friends.

Another thing that I would like to do is to work with children. I know a number of friends who have been Big Brothers. Another friend, who is retired and lives outside the city, works with the health unit and transports cancer patients back and forth to the city for treatment. My friends get a lot of satisfaction out of their volunteer work. I would like to do something like this.

CASE STUDY 3: ANDRÉ MÉNARD*

André Ménard had been the CEO of a hospital in a small city for 17 years. In addition, he was asked to take on a similar job at a nearby hospital and to merge the two hospitals within a year. He felt that this was the right thing to do and enthusiastically agreed to undertake the task. Partway through the year, he decided that the completion of the merger would be a good time for him to retire. At the age of 58, with the successful completion of the project, he left his organization. He found the transition very difficult. The interview took place 16 months after he retired.

There were several reasons why I decided to retire after the merger was completed. One was my desire to do something else with my life. I wanted to change my lifestyle largely because of the overwhelming speed and requirements of being a CEO. It is hard to work 70 hours a week on a constant basis. I felt my job was jeopardizing my health. The fact that I had had bone cancer at the age of 43, and for nine weeks didn't know if I would come through it or not, was a factor in my decision to leave. I also didn't want to end up like my father, who worked until he was 70.

I remember taking a holiday with my wife in Florida and walking the beach for three consecutive days. On the third day, I decided that I would leave. I would allow myself six months before making the announcement and six more months to prepare for the transition and work with my successor. This is exactly how it turned out.

I advised my chair of my decision a month after I got back. I had played with the idea for a while just to

The first year is one of transition, and I am really enjoying it. We have one major project under way, which we have planned for some time—our cottage is getting a major renovation. When our daughter goes to university, we will move there. So, I am the general manager on the project, and this will take most of my time throughout the summer and into the fall. We will see what happens after that.

make sure it was the right thing and that I felt comfortable with my decision. My chair encouraged me to take a leave of absence to recharge my batteries and then return to work. But I said that it was time to do something else, and I was quite firm in my decision.

I was very pleased with the transition at work and with my exit from the organization. There were a number of very nice celebrations of my contribution to the hospital and I felt good about leaving.

I had spent a great deal of time planning my departure, making sure that it went smoothly. But I didn't plan much beyond that. My wife had had a very smooth transition to retirement, and I expected the same, but mine was not. I missed being CEO and leading and helping people. I missed that probably more than anything. And I missed the sense of power. I felt naked. It's a very strange feeling.

I had lost a great deal very suddenly. I felt totally powerless, totally useless, and guilty that I had left something that was still in the making. It's like getting off the bus before your destination. I felt emptiness and loneliness after being hyper 16 or 17 hours a day for so many years.

My wife and I left on a month-long trip, and, rather than enjoy it, I felt sick, both emotionally and physically. What was happening to me? As I thought about it, I realized that I had not considered what was to come next for me—I had not given any thought as to what I would do for the rest of my life.

I am a very reflective person, and on our trip, I read a lot. I bought some self-help books that dealt with taking

* a pseudonym

charge of your life. I developed a framework to help me think about what my life should look like. The framework is a circle made up of six segments: work, spiritual well-being, contribution to others, fun and adventure, emotional and physical health, and relationships.

My previous life was all about work—it took up well over 70 per cent; there was little time for anything else. Health care is not a job, it's a calling, and I was very committed and passionate about my work. But my passion had taken its toll on me.

It took me about nine months before I started to feel better physically, to get back into shape and to have all of the pains disappear. Your body talks to you big time, and mine sure talked to me.

My wife was very supportive of me along the way. She never did try to influence me. She had retired two years earlier from a job that she had held for 27 years. She never looked back. She went on to a new life with many interests. She took some courses, became skilled at investing, and now manages our portfolio. She is an active grandmother and a good golfer.

Our marriage has been strong and happy for 37 years. Our new situation, with both of us retired, led to some stressful times. Our kids were grown up and had left home, we had different interests, and we had to work through this. My wife wanted more of my time, and I had things that I wanted to do, mainly in terms of contributing to the community. The wonderful thing is that we talked about it regularly and we worked through our issues. The lesson I learned is that you can't take anything for granted.

To help me come to terms with my new situation of being retired, I decided early on to write about my life. I did it by decade and I ended up with 60 pages. I wanted to learn about my strengths and weaknesses and how I would connect this to my future with the six-element framework that I had developed. I worked on this for about six months and it was really helpful in getting me to think about my future. It was very cathartic.

A plan started to emerge for me. I felt strongly about giving back to the community through serving in a voluntary capacity on a hospital board. I also wanted to be connected with a university in order to transfer my knowledge and to mentor others. The third element was my family and friends. I established clear objectives in each of these areas. I kept my framework on the wall and I reviewed it every six months. After a while I had objectives in all areas except work. I did not want to work for pay.

A year after I retired, my wife planned a one-month trip for us to the West Coast and Alaska in our motor home. I biked a lot along the way. It was a beautiful trip and it was during this time that I feel that I made the break with the past. I realized then that there was no way I was going back to work. I accepted the fact that I was now retired and had to do something else. Retired is the worst word; I wish we could find a more appropriate one, because it's a period of life when you unload. It took me 16 months to do so, and I was unbalanced for a period of time.

If I were to offer advice to others, I would say, "Get ready." Once you reach the gate and you cross over, start thinking as far ahead as possible. Talk to others; start thinking about what you really want to do. Do you have another passion? Do you have something else? What do you want to let go and what do you want to bring on board, and is this what you really want to do? Don't re-invent the wheel. Look at what's already inside you, and bring out the best, unload the rest. Decide how you intend to redirect your energies. Ask yourself: if it's your inner self that you express through work, then how can you do it in a different way?

For me, I am now experiencing a tremendous feeling of satisfaction, accomplishment, and wellness with a big W—Wellness in general. Everything is possible—I still have my health, I still read, I still contribute. Everything is there and I can enjoy it more.

CASE STUDY 4: JOANNE SMITH*

At the completion of a five-year contract, Joanne Smith, vice-president of a Canadian organization, decided it was time to move on to something else. She was asked several times to reconsider and manage a large-scale project, but she decided that this was not what she wanted. She retired at the age of 61. The interview took place three years after her departure. Unlike the persons in the other case studies, Joanne Smith was not living with a partner at the time of her retirement.

My team and I had done most of the planning for a major marketing campaign that was scheduled to run for about five years. I decided I just didn't want to invest the amount of energy and effort that would be required for another five years and didn't think that, professionally, I should ever leave in the middle of implementing a project. When I left my previous employer to take the position at this organization, my idea was that I would work for five years and then decide whether to stay or leave for consulting projects. The president asked me several times to reconsider and when I told him I had made up my mind, he asked if I would stay for three years instead of five. I knew I didn't really want to, so I stuck to my decision.

The departure was a very positive experience. I didn't have any negative emotions. I had no regrets. This was a big surprise to me, and frankly, most of my friends couldn't believe it. But I think that people who hang on at all costs and don't move forward to learn new things are a bit sad. My employer did a very nice thing by asking me to host a conference tour to Europe at the time of my retirement. The trip was wonderful because it was just the perfect thing to do for a month. Then it was Christmas, so I didn't have to start thinking. In the new year, I set goals for myself and formulated four areas on which to concentrate: relationships, intellectual stimulation, community work, and health maintenance.

I did do some consulting for about a year or so after I retired, but I didn't enjoy it. I discovered that I prefer implementing strategies I've developed. What I may have done differently and what I would advise somebody else to do is to have two options or intellectual pursuits so that

you can test them both. I didn't do that. I just had the one in mind and I found that not so satisfying.

It took me about a year to get my energy back. But I am lucky. Healthwise, I've had nothing compared to what other people have gone through.

The one thing I do miss sometimes is not knowing what the action is all about, what is going on across the country, who's who, and who's doing what. During my entire career, I travelled domestically and internationally, meeting entrepreneurs and other interesting people both inside and outside the corporate and public sector worlds. Once you leave, however, it doesn't take very long for that to change. I do miss the action and the social interaction networking provides. I've been able to keep that up in my own circle, but it's not the same.

During the first three years in my last organization, there wasn't much balance in my life. This was mainly because it was a big job: I had a learning curve, and was on my own. In my previous position, I had had a little better balance, with a committed partnership, a fair amount of community work, and golfing. It is important to examine work-life balance. I always enjoyed a variety of interests, but I know now that, on the relationship side, I erred in being too focused on work. For me, retirement was not the most important defining moment of my life; the breakup with my partner had more impact. Given the circumstances, I'm not unhappy now that my marriage ended, but the biggest fear of all is growing old alone.

I think there is a danger for those who, in making the transition from work to retirement, haven't taken the time to keep a relationship growing in synchronicity. I've seen some couples who handle the transition beautifully and are the best of pals, and I've seen the reverse. To people who value their relationships, I would say make sure that you nurture your relationship along the way to the best of your ability, because it'll be too late if you leave it all until you retire.

Of the goals I have now, I'm doing well in fostering friendships. I have always worked hard at maintaining friendships, and invest even more in that now. I love it. My commitment to exercise waxes and wanes, and I'm volunteering on the boards of three community

* a pseudonym

projects. It's the intellectual stimulation goal that I haven't figured out totally. I don't want another career; I don't miss the job side of things at all. I'm bored with all the old stuff. But I'd like to find something totally new.

I admire my entrepreneurial friends in their 80s who are still mentally in gear, and I know that that's what I need to do. It's a bit of a waste that I'm not more intellectually stimulated. I get some of it through community work. I'm on a hospital board, learning about the hospital and health care generally. It's complicated; I've never been in the field, so I've a lot to learn. I'm also participating in the music scene and taking singing lessons again (a childhood pursuit). That's just for fun.

The desire to travel conflicts with my desire to take a course in public policy. I'm not around much in the winter. The hardest part of retirement is getting things all organized, because there's so much to do and you can't do it all.

When you are in the working world and you go to a cocktail party, a tremendous amount of the dialogue surrounds what you do, not who you are. Now, at parties, I find I meet people who are still working who talk constantly about how busy they are. It's such a pre-occupation. I say to myself, I sure hope I didn't do too much of that, trying to impress people with how busy I was. It is totally boring when people try to impress you with how busy they are at work because that says there's no balance. I believe some of the things I do now are perhaps making more of a contribution, and I find myself questioning some of the things I did in my career. Were those contributions really all that important or useful, or were they mostly just for my benefit, for financial or personal growth reasons? What kind of contribution did they really make to the broader society? How did they contribute to what life's all about? All these questions are intellectually stimulating and challenging, and are undoubtedly part of the transition. The focus on what you do changes markedly.

To remain stuck in the past is unfortunate. For example, at a dinner party I met a man who, at age 74, talked negatively and exclusively about the company from which he retired seven or eight years earlier. I thought to myself, "He's been gone several years, why is he still focused on what he did as opposed to who he is as a person?"—because that's what becomes important, who you are. You can't be defined by what you did. When I asked him what he did for intellectual stimulation, he said he drank vodka. He finally said he enjoyed walking his dog, but that was it. And I thought his lack of self-esteem or worth was the saddest thing and very scary.

Of course, women have struggled with lack of self-esteem for years. Many feel a lack of self-worth because they "just work in the home," which is so silly, yet devastating. But, they have been made to feel that this work is not valued. Some career people who leave work face the same issues of self-worth, and that's likely why they have trouble with the transition. Why, as the anecdote above suggests, is a man seven or eight years into retirement still trying to define himself by his work? It is probably because he felt that that was what was expected of him, or maybe that's his only definition of himself. He is a very unhappy guy. It's pretty disastrous if you haven't figured out who you are as a person and why you're valuable.

A quotation that has really stuck with me and has shaped my prevailing attitude suggests that, in the play of life, this time of life is the third act. It's the most important act of all; it's the climax; it's where everything comes together. If you think about the third act as being the most important, the most fun, the most enriching and rewarding, then you think about retirement as a positive, uplifting time. Otherwise, you have a tendency to think, "Oh my gosh, it's all over." I don't subscribe to that view. I am now in the process of finding a mentor/coach to help me with this next phase.

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