

The Career Doctor



You thought retirement would be bliss, but it's more like hell. Hugh Davies explains how to handle (or prevent) this predicament.

Q It is six months since I have retired, and I have just found myself sharpening the knives for the third time this month. There has got to be more to retirement than this!

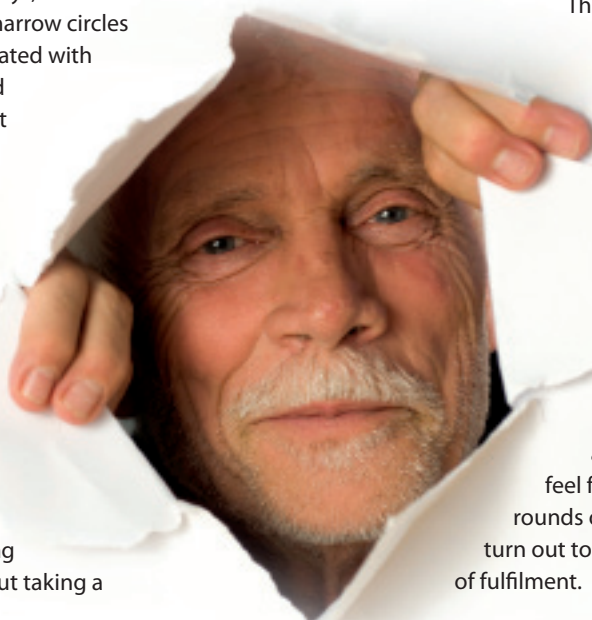
A There is no question that being an employed or self-employed person in regular work fills in a large part of how most individuals define themselves. As Gordon Livingston observes in *Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart* (Hachette Australia 2009): "We are not what we think, or what we say or how we feel, we are what we do" – and an awful lot of our 'doing' occurs at work. People who step out of work – whether involuntarily, or voluntarily – have a lot to think about and do to replace both the time spent at work, and the impact it has on how they view themselves.

Work provides structure to most days, it is associated with wide rather than narrow circles of relationships, it is usually associated with doing something constructive and providing meaning or validation at some level. Work exercises both intellectual and social skills. Work for many people is a form of self-expression and, providing the stress and effort sometimes involved are reasonable, work often stretches us and helps us grow capabilities and insights. Full-time work usually delivers income, too.

Working full-time has its disadvantages, of course. But I think that ripping all these validating and stretching things away, without taking a

great deal of care to replace them, is for some people fairly catastrophic. Stepping out of work and doing something else – whether by choice or not – is a much bigger transition than many acknowledge. The dream of "doing something for me", of "finding new forms of expression" and "taking a long break from the grind" is often a bit illusory – and more than a few people find themselves looking for something constructive to do, something much better than sharpening the knives for the third time in a month!

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The answer is not necessarily to stay at work in the old job, but it is to prepare for a transition, and to start building the activities which will replace work – well ahead of making this change, if you can. And if the retirement is brought upon you with little notice, then set about finding some new 'work' – acknowledging that it may be different from the past, but will be most likely just as important in helping you continue to feel fulfilled. For many, the dream of endless rounds of golf and the 'relaxation' of retirement turn out to be insufficient for an enduring sense of fulfilment.

What 'new work'?

The 'new work' taken up as an alternative to full-time regular employment may not be paid work – or it may be a portfolio of activities, some paid and some unpaid, perhaps. Here are some ideas.

You might consider such things as consulting, teaching, returning to being a student, starting a new business, joining someone else in a business or supporting your partner in a new business, being an 'angel' investor, becoming a volunteer or engaging at some other level in a community organisation.

The new work may also entail helping out raising the grandchildren; travelling with a focus on learning new things; writing a book, a play, or a television or film script; working in an offshore aid organisation or as a paid consultant in a development bank. Another popular interim career is leading a home renovation – but you could take this into property development: buying and restoring houses, for example.

Ideally your new working life, post-regular employment, will engage talents and interests built up in the years before this change. Generally, the past is a good guide to the future. Look through your achievements and the things you were doing when you felt really good about yourself. Then use this thinking both to set directions and to guide your investigations

of how to bring new work into being. Think of transitions that build on your strengths and knowledge, rather than ones which would need quite radical redefinition.

This is not to say that long-cherished aims to write a book or travel, for example, should be abandoned. But for most people, these are best brought about as adventures to be blended in with other things, rather than seen as the absolute total of your new working life.

Finally, identifying and capturing new work, including and perhaps especially a portfolio of activities, takes time and often requires skills long since neglected (or even new skills). Take time, seek advice and expect this new journey to take quite a while to crystallise. ■

→ MORE

Hugh Davies is the managing director of Macfarlan Lane – a business offering career transition and career development services to organisational clients. The company's website includes a special section with a range of downloadable articles on 'Career changes for people in mid to late careers'.

Ph 1300 852 788

Web www.macfarlanlane.com.au

Email hdavies@macfarlanlane.com.au

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