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ENCORE

For Some, Retirement Brings Grief

One Remedy: Diversifying Your Interests While You're Still Working

By TOM LAURICELLA

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Ryan Snook

For some retirees and their jobs, breaking up can be hard to do.

After decades of punching a clock, most retirees look forward to slowing down, having more time for interests and activities that had been squeezed into a few hours at night or on weekends.

But not everyone makes that transition easily. For some, career is identity, co-workers are their social network, and providing for family their purpose. These retirees find themselves adrift, struggling in a time of life everyone keeps telling them they should be relishing, a time that they themselves had believed they would enjoy.

“A lot of people don’t realize that how they define themselves is by the work that they do, their profession, their stature,” says Carmen Morano, associate professor at Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College in New York.

WSJ Radio

Tom Lauricella and WSJ's Hank Weisbecker discuss the tough transition into retired life

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“There is the idea that we’ll wake up at 67 and now we can put on a different set of clothes and do something different,” says Mr. Morano. “But then, you suddenly realize, ‘I never thought through who I was because I was so busy earning a living.’ ”

Many individuals find ways to extend their careers part-time well into what were once considered retirement years. But with some jobs, that’s not logistically feasible. And life is inherently unpredictable. Some retirees find their career extensions derailed by corporate downsizing. Health problems can often interfere, either by making it hard or impossible for a person to continue working, or sometimes in the form of a spouse who needs care.

There is good news, however. Experts say retirees who find they are feeling lost after getting that final paycheck can, with a little time and effort, work their way out of the funk. With some introspection, they can find ways to leverage interests they hadn’t had much time for, putting their workplace skills to use as a mentor or volunteer, or finding new interests.

“When people think about retirement, it is mostly about savings and so forth,” says Bob Knight, a professor of psychology and gerontology at the University of Southern California. “But we’re at a point where you may spend almost as much time retired as you spend working, and a major issue we don’t think about is the psychological side of retirement.”

When Norman Clemens, now 81, was going through the process of closing down his psychotherapy practice in Cleveland while in his mid-70s, he wondered how his self-esteem and sense of self-fulfillment would fare after he was no longer seeing clients. He wondered if he would grieve the loss of his professional status.

He says he misses the social aspect of having his office in a medical building with other doctors. And most significantly, he misses the intellectual exercise of working with clients, the trust placed in him by clients and the satisfaction of helping them. “It was really hard to stop,” he recalls.

After grieving for that part of his career, he has moved on. “I have to face the future,” he says.

He fills his time staying connected to his profession by writing and sitting on boards, and enjoys spending time with his wife as she pursues her interests. And as for social interactions: “You reach out to form new relationships if old ones are slipping away,” he says.

Hunter’s Mr. Morano says that while it might sound clichéd, retirees struggling with a transition away from a career should allow themselves time to adjust and realize they aren’t alone. “When we think we are the only one who wasn’t ready [for retirement]...it magnifies the significance of the issue,” he says.

Mr. Morano notes there are many resources for retirees trying to orient themselves. Government-sponsored departments on aging are often helpful, he says. There are also mentoring programs that put business skills to work helping charities or individuals with their own enterprises. Many

retirees find a sense of belonging by becoming more active in their spiritual life. And, of course, retirees can find new areas of interests, such as by “auditing” classes at local colleges that allow older adults to sit in on lectures for little or no cost.

Some may feel pressure to do something—anything—to fill their time. USC’s Mr. Knight encourages retirees to find something that fits their individual personality if they want their new interests to stick—and to be meaningful to them.

Mr. Knight says there’s a lesson here for those not yet in retirement. “Check in during your working life and look at how big a chunk of life work is,” he says, “and think about how much of ‘myself’ is based on work—and try to diversify that.”

Ultimately, most retirees enjoy their time, says Mr. Knight: “Our culture puts a lot of emphasis on work, but there is a lot more to life than just working.”

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