



Lifelong Learning on the Way to Retirement

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Imagine nearing retirement age yet not being able to retire. Imagine working most of your career making less than what your degree and experience deserve.

After 20 years of working in workforce and community development, these stories ring loudest in today's job market, especially in marginalized communities. And it's leading to the need for an increase in part-time income opportunities.

More and more aging adults are returning to school not to pursue another degree, but to take advantage of reduced tuition and easily accessible classes. And with that, they are reclaiming their academic and financial freedom.

This has happened for two main reasons:

The High Cost of Retiring

Firstly, there is an ever-increasing cost of living that needs to be considered when looking to and planning for retirement. And, inevitably, there is a realization that retirement is just out of reach for a lot of Americans: Always close but never close enough, especially for those that have traumatic life circumstances or are victims of systemic oppression. The latter have found themselves behind the curve of financial freedom. The vast racial and gender gaps for pay in our country have led to many aging adults considering certifications and other educational tools that they may use in their retirement years as a stepping stone to find more passive or part-time income. And the addition of selective income is a game-changer. The wonderful thing is that this new residual income can be used on their terms and schedule, making it easy to pay pending bills and have the freedom to enjoy their golden years.

Technology Rules the World

Secondly, technology is ever-evolving, leading to an increased demand for technologically advanced workers. In a world where technology and automation are revolutionizing the work industry, we are seeing more and more aging workers returning to school to learn new and innovative ways to continue working in their chosen fields. Technology brings massive benefits to the workforce. It makes tasks easier to complete, allowing people to be more productive for longer. But technology used at the expense of people is a weapon that can prove lethal to many who have worked their entire careers planning for their retirement. Some are deciding to walk away from careers altogether when they find that their position is being downsized for automation. Others are rolling with the punches and are retraining to become more marketable to companies through certifications and short-term education programs.

As the world changes, the workforce has to adapt to the times. As more and more people find themselves preparing for the next step in their professional journeys, we will continue to see an increase in certification programs. This is being driven by the rise in technology usage in the workplace. This uptick in shorter-term training and certifications will increase income to households and provide more opportunities for individuals to increase their revenue and marketability in the workforce. As household incomes increase, we will begin to see the economic landscape of families and communities change for the better. And while I recognize that education is necessary, it needs to be accompanied by opportunity.

Without opportunity, all the training in the world won't alleviate the pressure of financial shortcomings. There is a growing population of aging adults who are looking to retire or reduce their work hours. As this continues to happen, we will see an increase in the need for skilled, trained individuals to continue working. I submit that all hiring managers and those responsible for recruiting new employees should consider looking in local communities for their next new hire. There are plenty of people who have completed training who are waiting for the opportunity to put their new skills to good use. Opening the door of opportunity could prove to be mutually beneficial. Offering a job opportunity could very well be the sharing of hope for an individual or family that is trying to increase their financial foothold in life.

To those of you who are creating space for aging workers to reinvent themselves, we applaud you for your great work. To the champion policymakers that are fighting to create just and equitable laws for all workers, we thank you. We need allies now more than ever. As you consider your next training or policy change, please keep in mind the real lives that are affected. Fingers are great for pointing but hands are better at building. Individually, we may be fingers but collectively we are hands—hands that can build and shape a just and equitable system for all workers.