Never too old to throw away the chalk and duster!

The glory days when ‘mature’ folks hit their 50’s and counted down the years and months until the holiest of grails, your 60th birthday are long, long gone. Retirement was a rite of passage and like baptism, scarcely a soul was overlooked; you simply reached the ripe old age of 60 and downed tools! Society at the time predetermined that this was a natural progression like giving up playing contact sports at 40 because you might get hurt and taking up golf and lawn bowls instead. When you were fortunate enough to add the moniker ‘grandparent’ to you list of titles, you simply made family and pleasing yourself, your life and that was that!

My father semi-retired at 55 and I didn’t think anything of it. He appeared happy and contented and filled his days with gentle pursuits. Mum had made house and home her sanctuary earlier and although a partner in small businesses, was a stay at home mum for much of the 1950’s and 60’s.

Money wasn’t an overarching issue as like many, my parents had planned for retirement throughout their lives and could be described as ‘comfortable’. Retirement though for them came just on the cusp of the government of the day bringing in ‘means testing’ for pensioners. Their nest-egg was open to government scrutiny and consequently halved the expected pension payments they expected to enjoy. A bold move by the government and a ‘shot over the bow’ to subsequent generations who believed the welfare state would go on providing forever.

Fast forward to modern times and you’re lucky to be retiring at 65, in some Western nations that’s been pushed back to 67. What’s surprising though, is the change in society’s view of retirement and old age. Age doesn’t appear to be a factor in stopping work and if you’re self-employed, longevity is definitely no indicator for retirement. Mature workers are in demand in a shrinking workforce and good job that’s the case because the skillset they have acquired was previously lost to the community far too early. That brings me to the teaching profession. When my husband and I started out in international Education in the early 1980’s there were few international schools operating and little was known about their existence outside of the communities they serviced. Staff rooms were typically populated by young single teachers or teaching couples with young families and we fell into the latter bracket. At 55, a teacher would have been perceived as indecently decrepit and there might have been unkind suggestions made as to their ability to hold down the job!

Oh the times are a changing! We live longer because we keep better health, almost a decade of economic uncertainty, globalization, a shrinking younger workforce have all played a role in shifting established norms for workers over the age of 60. But equally, self-awareness and determination have also played a significant role in the decision not to leave the workforce at a pre-determined age…that and the value of the ‘nest egg’ having been eroded! There has been a proliferation of international and private schools established chiefly throughout the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Europe. Demand for the English language, (and now Mandarin as well), has not kept pace with the dearth of teachers persuaded to swap their classrooms for an international one. Oil rich governments keenly aware of the need for infrastructure and an educated population have embraced school reform projects with greater or lesser success and the expansion of branded schools and universities beyond their traditional home sites have all fueled the need for qualified teachers. The situation is escalating and demand will only increase for the foreseeable future. Countries with hard and fast rules about cut-off ages are having to review their policies. Schools that have previously made it clear that teachers must leave by 60 are revaluating this decision. Private-Public partnerships between local governments and education related companies are seeing the value of experience and a skillset developed over many successful years of classroom practice. Results prove that mature teachers can raise standards and this is particularly valuable in those last two years of high school.

Granted, the opportunities available to the over 60’s are not as prevalent as those for younger teachers, but at least they are there and demand does not look as if it will be abating in the short term.

More often than not when schools have constraints on age, it is the school’s policy and not government policy. However, given shortages, particularly when it comes to IB Diploma and A-Levels teaching, exceptions can often be made. There remains a steady demand for consultants, teacher trainers and advisory roles that are only enriched by capable, experienced educators.

It’s a plus that society now views its aging population as an asset and therefore encourages teaching professionals to continue contributing into their 70’s in some instances. We don’t see politicians downing tools in their 60’s. Prime Ministers, Presidents, CEO’s, Company Presidents, Popes and Monarchs continue their working lives well into their 70’s and many into their 80’s without prejudice. Changing society perceptions of work and age is encouraging. With the ‘big questions’ of this century still unanswered; climate change, resource management, overpopulation to name but a few, it’s going to take a combination of experience, creativity and innovation to solve our dilemmas. The knowledge, know-how and sheer savvy of a generation of teachers previously lost to the classroom are keenly needed alongside their younger, dynamic, energetic and often more techy colleagues to develop the next generation of thinkers and problem solvers.

Studies have proven that challenging the mind offsets diseases that are a scourge to the aged; what better way to continue to stimulate your brain by having to embrace new teaching methods and its incumbent technologies? An added incentive is the social aspect of being around young people, interesting colleagues and ongoing learning. This coupled with immersion in a new and rich culture in an international setting is the type of stimulus needed for an extraordinarily long, healthy and happy life! Nothing better!

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