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Leisure Suits

Can Soon-to-Retire Corporate Types Survive Without Their Titles?

by Toni Page Birdsong

It's no surprise that lawyer and professor A. L. Goodhart once said, "Americans hardly ever retire from business: They are either carried out feet first or they jump from a window." After all, Americans, compared to other industrialized countries, have never really learned how to relax. They take far fewer vacation days per year and leave those getting ready to retire psychologically and socially unprepared.



According to UCLA Extension professor Dr. Gail S. Eisen, what should be a reward for a lifetime of hard work is, rather than a period of new adventures, a shocking transition for many business people—especially middle and upper managers and high-ranking CEOs.

"Up until the time people retire they are bombarded with how to prepare financially; there are seminars and investment programs. But seldom are people prepared for the real changes that can take place emotionally," Dr. Eisen said.

According to Dr. Eisen, a consultant to companies and universities worldwide in older workforce issues and the psychology of retirement, the biggest things people fail to anticipate in retirement are the personal, social and interpersonal changes.

"People are concerned with how they will redefine themselves. Some people, in particular men, are dealing with feelings of role loss and some even go so far as to say they are grieving; it's a real identity issue," Dr. Eisen said. "Another big change is in the marital relationship. Most people will be granted 40-60 hours of additional free time a week for the first time since they started school. There are huge changes that come along with that freedom."

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor, Americans are retiring earlier today than in previous periods in history—the average age is 62—and they are living longer. These two factors, according to Dr. Eisen, mean that Americans will be spending a large portion of their lives—about 30 percent—in retirement.

To meet the upheaval in both identity and lifestyle it takes mental preparation and a progressive attitude toward leisurely activity, according to Dr. Eisen, who added that the obstacles in retirement for Americans, essentially are cultural.

"People who were raised with a strong work ethic have trouble adapting to long periods of leisure and unstructured time. Americans as a group don't adapt well to leisure and few cultivate hobbies outside of work," Dr. Eisen said.

Leisure Time

In fact, comparative data offered by Dr. Eisen in regard to vacation time shows that in the U.S., the average vacation time allotted for an entry-level employee is two weeks of paid vacation a year. In France, that number, also for entry-level employees is five weeks in addition to paid holidays; in England, the same; in Sweden it's 27 days of paid vacation; in Germany it's six weeks of paid vacation plus 10 paid holidays and a 37-hour work week. Even in less developed countries such as Turkey and Brazil the workforce has adopted longer vacation periods than the U.S.

Dr. Eisen says retirement seems to affect white collar workers more than blue-collar workers. For some it's a rude awakening to the real world where there finally have to do things for themselves. "It's not uncommon to hear someone in one of my classes complain about the lack of secretarial support in retirement; of being put on hold for five minutes at a time and having to make their own calls."

Wed Locked

In her doctoral dissertation, a three-year study of 56 retired couples, Dr. Eisen found that one of the biggest changes after retirement is in the marital relationship. While single people embarking on retirement need to think about how deep their ties are to work and begin cultivating activities outside of work prior to retirement, the psychological turbulence for married couples can be detrimental depending on the amount of communication that takes place before retirement begins.

"People should discuss their expectations of retirement before they retire; what they want to do, how they envision their lives," Dr. Eisen said. "People should build in 'separation activities' during the week to give each other privacy. Some people enroll in college courses—which gives a couple new things to talk about—or elder hostels; others have a mall day, a library day or volunteer at public schools and museums. This is all part of the important role of replacing work with meaningful activities."

Surprisingly, of the couples Dr. Eisen studied, the men retiring had an easier time than did their female counterparts, many of whom were used to being at home already and felt less autonomy once their husbands

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were home full-time.

"Women in retirement seem to be making the most accommodations for the men; many complain that there's twice the household tasks, twice the meals to prepare and little or no increase in help from the husbands," Dr. Eisen said. "Men on the other hand complained of feeling overburdened with requests for household repair tasks from their wives and the lack of 'alone' time. Women many times expect more 'together' time after retirement and many men want to be alone to think, read or simply rest and recover from the many years of stress and strain imposed by their jobs."

Another discussion that needs to take place prior to retire-

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*—Dr. Gail S. Eisen,
consultant on workforce issues*

ment is that of physical space, says Eisen who noted that many times, corporate people will need an additional desk or even an office in the home for files, books and personal workplace mementos that he or she associate with their self image.

Space Invaders

There is good news, too, in the adjustment process. Despite some of the problems which surface in the home following retirement, both men and women reported feeling more satisfied in their marriages with improvements taking place in communication, a greater sensitivity toward the other spouse's needs and more time for shared activities, according to Dr. Eisen.

Also, some retirees described a sense of rediscovery of their spouse and expressed the joy of getting to know that person all over again without distractions from work and kids.

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"Primarily, people just need to prepare for the interpersonal and psychological changes they will face in retirement, they need to think about them and talk about them beforehand," Dr. Eisen said. "Retirement really is what many discover: A time filled with unlimited opportunity and for many, a new window on the world which provides a sense of liberation."

Dr. Eisen's UCLA Extension course "Meeting the Emotional and Social Challenges of Retirement," is geared toward both pre-retirees and recent retirees. For more information call (310) 825-2301. The course is slated for Jan. 20 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.



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