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Baby boomers find meaning in 'encore careers' at nonprofit groups

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Move over, Bill Gates. You've got company.

The former full-time executive of Microsoft and present co-chairman of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is just one of an estimated 1.1 million baby boomers who have traded jobs in the corporate world for work at nonprofit organizations.

And millions more will follow, according to a recent survey by Civic Ventures and the MetLife Foundation. About three-fourths of the nation's 78 million boomers plan to work beyond the traditional retirement age, with as many as half saying they're interested in jobs that help others.

"We're seeing the beginnings of a large workforce for social change," said Phyllis Segal, vice president of Civic Ventures, a think tank that tracks boomers in "encore careers" that offer not only a paycheck, but also the chance to do good.

More and more members of the generation that came of age at the dawn of the civil rights, environmental and women's movements in the 1960s and '70s are deciding to complete their careers at nonprofit agencies that feed the homeless, comfort the elderly and mentor the young.

As head of an executive search firm, Gwyneth Lloyd had built a successful career matching employers and employees. So when she became chief program officer for the Girl Scouts of Northeast Texas this spring, she knew it was the perfect fit.

The 54-year-old Dallas resident has raised two daughters, counseled young mothers in India and mentored businesswomen early in their careers. At the Girl Scouts, she's channeled that lifelong interest in nurturing girls and young women into a vocation she hopes will make a difference for 42,000 girls.

"When I was growing up, I never lacked for confidence," she said. "I want every girl and young woman to have that same kind of self-esteem."

The nonprofit's chief executive, Colleen Walker, said she values Ms. Lloyd's management expertise as much as her passion for her work.

"More than ever, our supporters expect results from their investment, and Gwyneth's solid business practices have helped make our organization more accountable," Ms. Walker said.

Leadership needed

Boomers' interest in charitable work comes as nonprofit agencies face a serious leadership deficit, said David Simms, an executive with the Bridgespan consulting group. A surge in retirements and a proliferation of nonprofit agencies will create a need for 640,000 senior managers over the next decade – more than double the current number, he said.

"To put that in perspective, it's like attracting half of every MBA graduating class at every college each year between now and then," Mr. Simms said.

Many boomers leaving businesses for nonprofit agencies say they're tired of the corporate treadmill.

But making the move isn't always easy. The pay is less; the hours can be long. And workers used to companies' fast-paced decisions may become frustrated by the collaborative style at nonprofit groups, Mr. Simms said.

Still, many of those who have traded their jobs with for-profit companies to work for nonprofits have no regrets.

Larry Sykes said that by the time he reached his late 50s, he was getting little satisfaction from his job as a commercial real estate broker.

Then he heard about a national program that helps homeless people find work by enrolling them in a free voice-mail service that broadcasts job listings daily. He knew instantly that's what he wanted to do.

Mr. Sykes approached the Stewpot, a Dallas charity that feeds the homeless, with the idea of bringing the Community Voice Mail program here.

"They liked my proposal but told me I'd have to raise the money for my salary and other expenses," he said.

Two months later, he was back with financial commitments from foundations and individuals.

"In real estate, I just helped rich guys get richer," Mr. Sykes said. "Now, I help people get a life."

More than 750 people have found employment or housing in the four years he has managed the program.

Nonprofit groups that want to capitalize on such interest from boomers will need to step up their recruitment, said Jill Casner-Lotto, a consultant for the Conference Board and author of the report "Boomers Are Ready for Nonprofits, But Are Nonprofits Ready for Them?"

The report concluded that agencies have done too little to educate midlife workers about encore careers. Though boomers may like the concept of working for a charitable organization, many have questions about how to follow through, Ms. Casner-Lotto said.

Getting guidance

Cynthia Nunn, president of the Center for Nonprofit Management in Dallas, said she counsels individuals on making the switch. Boomers and others considering second careers in the charitable sector can sign up for programs at the center that explain the differences between the business and nonprofit worlds.

"As the nonprofit sector tries to make every dollar go further, agencies are placing a premium on accountants, financial managers, strategic planners and others with similar backgrounds," she said.

Some boomers want second careers that give them the flexibility to pursue other interests, says the Conference Board report. So nonprofit agencies need to offer part-time employment, four-day workweeks and telecommuting, Ms. Casner-Lotto said.

Sydney Farrier now works three days a week at the Alzheimer's Association. She manages seminars and support groups for people in the early stages of the disease. The 61-year-old Dallas resident retired last year as director of

an assisted-living community.

She likes her flexible schedule because it lets her volunteer at another nonprofit agency, care for her 84-year-old mother and help her husband with his computer software business.

"I guess I'm one of those people who's happier when she's working," she said. "I haven't thought about retiring. It's more important for me to know I'm contributing."

NORTH TEXAS' NONPROFIT SECTOR

131,000

Number of people employed by North Texas' nonprofit organizations, about 9 percent of the area's workforce

9,234

Number of registered nonprofits in Dallas County

\$10.5 billion

Revenue of Dallas County nonprofits

\$25.8 billion

Assets of Dallas County nonprofits

SOURCE: Center for Nonprofit Management; Civic Ventures; MetLife Foundation

ENCORE CAREERS

Here's a look at what boomers say they would like to do ...

36%: Advocate for a group or issue they care about

32%: Work with children and youth

31%: Work to preserve the environment

31%: Teach

24%: Work to protect the safety of communities

23%: Work on poverty

23%: Work with a religious organization

17%: Work with the elderly

17%: Work in health care