

While We Were Working, the World Wobbled: A Boomer's dilemma

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by Deborah F. Jenks

Baby Boomers* entered the workplace with the idealism and enthusiasm that epitomized our generation. Many of us joined organizations with the intention of working loyally at a good wage for a lifetime, or at least until retirement. Then we would receive a pension and social security to compensate for our long hours of work to enjoy some well-earned leisure.

In the early 1990s, we awoke to realize that the psychological work contract had become null and void. I remember the shock when fellow IBMers were laid off for the first time in the company's history. It was a good 'package,' but the emotional devastation was difficult for each person to overcome. The 'downsized' people were faced with finding jobs in a slow market and the remaining IBMers realized job security no longer existed. In addition, they were required to work harder with fewer resources. Trust in the paternal or protective organization had been broken. The world we knew was gone in a twinkle of an eye.

What Changed?

The goal of most Boomer college graduates was to procure a job with a large, international company with great potential for growth and promotion. We believed the unspoken contract that if we worked hard, were loyal, and provided results, the company would provide an increasing salary, benefits and job security. All this disappeared in the 1980s and '90s. Charles Handy (1990) in *The Age of Unreason* cites the rise of 'shamrock' organizations as an example of changing organizational priorities. They consist of three clover leaves, with the core comprised of overworked employees, contractors and committed part-time employees. The result was that careers at one organization, or even the hope of maintaining a full-time job, became a rare situation. Many moved to the 'dotcoms' for the dream of quick riches. This too went bust in the early part of the new millennium, further breaking Boomer's trust in organizational promises. In addition, once sought-after IT professionals began to see their jobs outsourced to India. What is a Boomer to do in this new world? What or who will look out for them now?

Portfolio of Possibilities

Handy (1990) described the rise of the phenomena of *portfolio lives*. In the past, lives were compartmentalized into work (9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.), church (Sunday mornings), rest and then family and friends received what was left over. Now people can have a portfolio where their time is sliced between salaried jobs, consulting for finite engagements, family, ministry, school or study

time, friends, *pro bono* work and rest. Depending on the season in life, different portions of the portfolio receive different emphases in time and attention. Since the world became less structured, a new mindset and behaviors were required. For example, today a parent can watch their child star in a school play during the day and then complete their required work on a laptop in the evening. Life can be enjoyed here and now, not just after retirement. In this environment some people experienced immediate freedom like a butterfly, while others struggle to emerge from the cocoon. According to Johnson (2004), a 1990 study by MacDonald and Makin revealed that non-permanent workers “scored significantly higher” on career development, commitment and job satisfaction. This was counter-intuitive to experts.

Willy Loman no More

We grew up with Willy Loman, the character in *Death of a Salesman* (Miller, 1949), epitomizing the older generation who romanticized the past and longed for ‘what could have been’. The world wobbled and gave us a choice. Like Willy Loman, we can wish for past securities to return or envision the possibilities of a new way of life.

In the Bible, at least two other generations had a similar choice. When Israel left Egypt under Moses’ leadership, they had the choice to grumble, complain and desire to return to the organizational slavery of the past or enter into the freedom of the Promised Land (New King James Version, Numbers 13:30, 14:20-31). They chose the former and died in the desert without their inheritance. When the newly-formed church (Acts 7 and onwards) came under severe persecution, they had a choice to return to either their Jewish or Gentile roots or move forward into a new revelation of Jesus and community (Acts 10, 15). They chose the latter and influenced the world profoundly (Acts 17:6).

The Power of Choice

Thomas Friedman (2005, p. 447) in *The World is Flat* suggests that people can perceive globalization from two perspectives: everyone in the world is brought down to the lowest common denominator or everyone can be brought up to new heights. If we translate this to flattened organizations, either there are less senior leaders or more leaders are required at all levels of the organization. Boomers may never have the option to be the type of leader we followed in our early careers, yet we can choose to be a leader of our own business, project, family and perhaps most importantly, our lives. In addition, we can begin to mentor the next generations to arrive at heights not yet reached.

The Best is yet to Come

The United States government recognizes this paradigm change in organizational structures. In a speech, President George W. Bush (2006) stated, “Small businesses create two out of every three new jobs”; “account for nearly half of America’s overall employment”; added “more than 5.1 million jobs since August 2003”; and “reduced America’s unemployment rate to 4.7 percent.” The opportunities for minorities have increased. Bush added, “Women own more than a quarter of businesses” and the rate for Hispanic-Americans opening their own businesses is “three times the national average.”

As Christians, we have another reason to rejoice. God created us for relationship. He expects us to hear His voice and follow His lead by obedience. Paul exhorts Christians to grow from glory to glory (2

Corinthians 3:18) which means aligning ourselves closer to His character and purposes. As we listen to God, our possibilities become limitless. We are not limited by the past or current organizational structures. We can create new structures and new businesses according to God's design. Nothing is impossible when our trust is in Him, rather than organizations or even ourselves.

Embrace a new mindset for such a time as this! The ability to achieve the *American Dream* is still alive. Yes, it looks different than the original Boomer dream. According to Bush's 2006 speech, the Small Business Administration (SBA) is encouraging entrepreneurs to start their own businesses by increasing the amount of loans by 80% and opening overseas markets to small business by fair trade agreements. Regent University recently combined the Business School and School of Leadership Studies to form the School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship. All of these are indicators that the door is wide open for Boomers to become entrepreneurs and start their own businesses. This is an incredible opportunity, but it takes initiative and thoughtful risk-taking.

Yes, the world wobbled, but we have the power to choose to be a leader in our life and the lives of others. So in the words of Nike: Just do it!

* A **Baby Boomer** is anyone born between 1946 and 1964 in a country that experienced an unusual spike in birth rates following World War II, a phenomenon commonly known as the baby boom. In the United States, the term is iconic and more properly capitalized as Baby Boomers. (Wikipedia definition)

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