



Louise McMillon works as a greeter at a Lowe's store in Charlotte, N.C., and hopes to continue until she turns 90.  
PHOTOGRAPH BY TRAVIS DOVE

FINANCIAL PLANNING | COVER

# More Americans Are Working Into Their 80s. What's Keeping Them in the Workforce.

As the baby boomers age, it's becoming more common for people to remain employed into their 70s and 80s. Why they still aren't ready to retire.

By [Elizabeth O'Brien](#) [Follow](#)

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**S**ometimes Fred Strnisa thinks about retirement. When he sees familiar names in the obituaries, or when the winter wind whips his upstate New York home, Strnisa, 81, wonders if maybe it's time for him to stop working as a professor of semiconductor manufacturing technology at Hudson Valley Community College.

Then he quickly dismisses the thought. "I really enjoy what I'm doing more than I'd enjoy retirement," he says.

The regard is mutual: Strnisa earns high marks from his students and supervisors at the college, where he teaches a full course load during the academic year. He arrived there in 2001 after a varied career in corporate America, academia, and state government. After retiring for the first time at age 55, he opened up his own business selling used cars, then answered an ad seeking a physics teacher for the local community college.

The work has kept him intellectually stimulated and engaged with students of traditional college age, as well as midcareer workers going back to school for more training. "It's not my job to give them the answer," Strnisa says. "My job is to lead them to an answer."

The job has also given him a sense of purpose and utility that has helped him cope with life's tragedies, including the death of his youngest daughter earlier this year.

Among octogenarians, Strnisa is an outlier. Just 5.3% of people 80 and over are either working or actively looking for work, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. But their ranks are expected to grow as the baby boomers hit their ninth decade; the oldest turn 80 in 2026. The number of workers ages 75 and over is expected to grow 78% from 2022 to 2023, the biggest increase of any age group, according to BLS projections. And indeed, almost half of working baby boomers remain or expect to remain in the labor force past 70, according to [a recent survey](#) by the Transamerica Center for Retirement Studies.

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Fifty years after boomer women blazed their way into corporate America, the postwar generation is poised to alter the face of the U.S. workforce yet again. Will we be prepared? “For the past 20 years, people in my business have been telling employers, ‘You have to get ready for this,’” says Jacquelyn James, founder of the Sloan Research Network on Aging & Work at Boston College. “I think the message is getting out.”

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## Electric for All

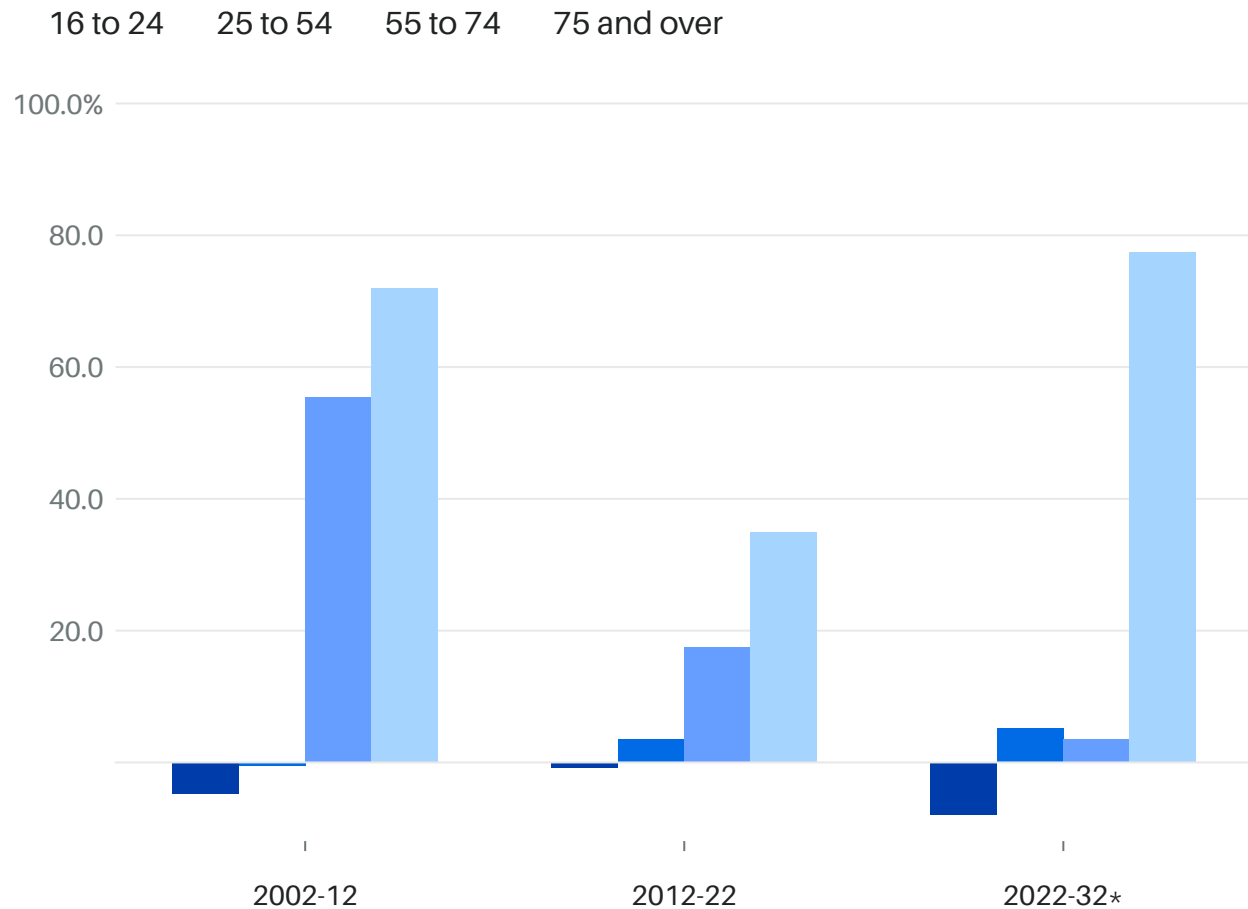
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Certainly the rising generation of octogenarian workers won’t be the first: Look no further than the current resident of the White House and many members of Congress (the median age in the Senate is 65). In the upper ranks of the business world, it has long been common to see leaders in their 70s (Blackstone’s Stephen Schwarzman, 76, is a current example), 80s (see: Barry Diller, 81, or Carl Icahn, 87), and, in some cases, even 90s (ever heard of a 93-year-old investor named Warren Buffett?).

## Aging Productively

People 75 and older are the fastest-growing slice of the workforce.

### Percent Change in Civilian Labor Force by Age



\*Projected

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

But the staggering size of the boomer cohort could mean changes to workplaces and the economy that we haven't seen before. From bolstering a labor market that's facing a shortfall of prime-age workers to pushing back against the ageism that remains rampant in many industries, the generation that never trusted anyone over 30 could continue to play changemaker as it pushes 80.

“We have lived for decades now with the notion that there is nothing for older people to do but have a vacation,” says Ken Dychtwald, founder and CEO of Age Wave, a think tank and consulting firm. “But I think we’re in a revolutionary moment right now.”

To be sure, workers should be able to clock out and enjoy retirement if that's their plan. The country needs policies and wages that help people save enough to do so, and financial security shouldn't hinge on the ability to labor indefinitely, says Beth Truesdale, co-editor of the recent book *Overtime: America's Aging Workforce and the*

*Future of Working Longer* and a research fellow at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research.

In reality, though, many Americans aren't able to save enough to support a comfortable retirement, and for them, continuing to work may be less a choice than a necessity.

As we look to a future when more of us will work for longer, there's a lot to be learned from the octogenarians who are already making a place for themselves in today's workforce. Whether they carry on out of love for their jobs, a desire to keep busy, or simply because they must, their stories open a window into the future of work.

## Financial Need

The workforce can't evolve fast enough for the looming retirement crisis. The median nest egg for a family headed by someone age 60 to 65, with household income of \$71,000 to \$126,000, was about \$150,000, according to an analysis of the Federal Reserve's 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances by the Employee Benefit Research Institute. Among higher-earning households, the balance was \$535,000, still not enough to sustain a decadeslong retirement. When possible, working longer can help stretch these dollars.

Despite starting to work at age 11, Louise McMillon, now 85, wasn't able to save much during her career. She held a series of jobs in restaurants, retail, and education while raising seven children in Charlotte, N.C. She receives Social Security, but says, "If I had to depend on that check, I'd probably be out on the street."

Today, McMillon works as a greeter at a Lowe's in Charlotte, where she is a beloved fixture every weekday from 10 a.m. until 3 p.m. The routine is so ingrained, she says, that sometimes at church she'll greet her fellow parishioners with, "Good morning, welcome to Lowe's."





Professor Fred Strnisa, 81, teaches a full course load at Hudson Valley Community College. Almost half of working baby boomers remain or expect to remain in the labor force past 70. PHOTOGRAPH BY NATHANIEL BROOKS

While the income from her work as a greeter is critical to maintaining her standard of living—and helped her support a grandson for years—the job is about more than a paycheck. “I think I know everyone in this community,” she says. “I love my job.”

The job loves her back. If customers don’t see Ms. Louise at her post, they’ll ask after her, she says. When her chronic sciatic nerve pain made it hard for her to stand at the store’s entrance, the company gave her a backless stool. That was even worse than standing, she told them, so it was upgraded to a cushioned rocking chair.

Such accommodations must become more common in order for the oldest workers to make significant inroads. But in many circumstances, employees are still putting their jobs at risk when they request adjustments for age-related issues, says Teresa Ghilarducci, professor of economics at the New School.

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Measuring the pervasiveness of age discrimination is difficult—in large part because many instances go unreported, says the government watchdog on workplace bias, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. In fiscal 2022, the agency received 11,500 charges of age discrimination. Nearly two-thirds of employees age 50 and over think older workers face discrimination in the workforce, according to an AARP poll last year. Seventeen percent said they've been the recipient of negative comments about their age at work, and 13% reported being passed up for a promotion or chance to get ahead because of their age.

Ghilarducci doesn't mince words when giving advice to older workers: "Try to hide your age," she says. This goes beyond obscuring your birth year, she notes—avoid any behaviors that would code you as old, and for goodness' sake, stop the self-deprecating jokes about creaking joints and other indignities of aging.

## Physical and Cognitive Health

Ellyn, 80, still works part time as a tailor at the menswear shop that has been her employer for the past 20 years. (Ellyn asked that her last name not be used because of privacy concerns.) She says she doesn't need the money, but appreciates that it allows her to continue paying for some of her favorite discretionary items, like magazine and newspaper subscriptions. The paycheck has also helped her to keep her retirement accounts untouched; she plans to leave them to her children.

She worries about current and future retirees who have fewer resources. "There's a huge swath of this country that won't be OK, and they don't know they won't be OK," she says.

But for her, the job offers a different motivation: a place to "put her energies." She doesn't interact with the customers whose clothes she alters, but she gets along very well with the shop's owner. On work days, she parks far from the shop to get some exercise walking there. (On her off days, she tends the 37 rose bushes she's growing at her home near Iowa City, Iowa: "It keeps me moving.")

Ellyn, 80, works part time as a tailor in a men's store in Iowa City, Iowa. PHOTOGRAPHED BY KC MCGINNIS

That physical activity is good for her brain as well as her body. The research linking exercise and brain health is well established. One study found the rate of cognitive decline among inactive adults was about double the rate found in active adults.

Estimates of the prevalence of cognitive decline in older populations vary, says James of the Sloan Research Network. A recent study by Columbia University found that nearly 10% of adults age 65 and older have dementia, while an additional 22% have mild cognitive impairment.

That said, “most people do not have the kind of decline that would affect their work,” James says. Older adults’ response times do slow, but their wisdom, experience, and problem-solving abilities tend to make up for that, she adds.

What’s more, the very act of working keeps people sharp. “Sitting around watching TV is not particularly good for brain health,” Dychtwald says.

Phyllis Mussina, 85, agrees. Earlier this year, she quit her job as a marketing director when the senior care facility where she worked changed hands and she didn’t feel



comfortable with the new ownership. She wasn't ready to leave. "I like to be productive," she says. "You have to do something that keeps your mind going."

Since then, Mussina, of Canton, Ohio, has stayed busy visiting friends and the residents of her former workplace. She has also expanded into the type of periodic work that many older people do after retiring from their full-time jobs, consulting informally on eldercare issues and serving on two nonprofit boards.

Mussina says that she has gotten a handful of job offers in recent months—both full time and part time—but has turned them all down because she's ready to leave the healthcare field. Instead, she's considering launching a magazine to help older adults navigate their options for senior-living facilities. "I don't like not working," she says.

If she starts her own venture, Mussina would be in the minority of the oldest workers. Among women 80 and over who were employed in 2019, just over 15% were self-employed, according to a report James co-wrote on the aging workforce for the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Among men, the share of self-employed was nearly a quarter.

## A Sense of Purpose

Almost a quarter of retirees reported challenges finding their life's purpose, according to a recent report from Age Wave and Edward Jones. Having a reason to get out of bed in the morning is key for emotional and physical health. [A 2017 study](#) found that an increased feeling of purpose in older adults was associated with a lower risk of developing weak grip strength and slow walking speed.

Michael Hacker, 80, experiences no greater joy than seeing students deeply engaged in their projects. This purpose has driven his work as the co-director of the Center for STEM Research at Hofstra University. There, he solicits and administers grants from the National Science Foundation that allow grade-school students the opportunity to solve real-world challenges like water scarcity.

The position represents a shift away from the earlier part of his career, which he spent in the classroom and at the New York State Education Department. There, he worked on developing standards for technological literacy—that is, a checklist of metrics by which to gauge students' knowledge of the subject. "I was a believer," he says.

Over time, he came to understand how too much of a focus on standards can rob students of the joy of learning. Teaching background knowledge is important, but so is allowing students to experience the "flow state" of being completely immersed in their work, he says.

He gets this message out through the grants that he administers at schools, and by speaking at conferences and publishing in academic journals. He isn't ready to give up his position in the public square. "One of the reasons I continue to work is because I have a soapbox," he says, "and I want to stand on the corner...for as long as I can."

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