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# Living Well: Retirement age should be more flexible and meaningful



Kanwaljit Soin



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With an increase in life expectancy, the benefits of older people continuing to work are immense for the individual and society

As part of the recent National Day Rally speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong revealed incremental changes that will be implemented to raise the retirement and re-employment ages.

It is a good time to look at what retirement means.

In his book, A History Of Retirement, William Graebner states that retirement is a modern invention and absent in pre-industrial societies.



Even now, for many people in low-and middle-income countries, the narrative of retirement remains abstract.

Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck of Germany invented the concept of retirement with a pension



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in 1883. At that time, Marxists were threatening to take control of Europe and, to prevent his country from being seduced by the Marxist philosophy, Bismarck announced that he would pay a pension to any non-working German over the age of 65.

Bismarck was an astute man. As this was the pre-penicillin era, not many people lived to age 65, but he won over his countrymen with the promise of a pension after 65. Thus, he also set the arbitrary world standard for the exact year at which old age begins and established the precedent that governments should pay people for growing old.

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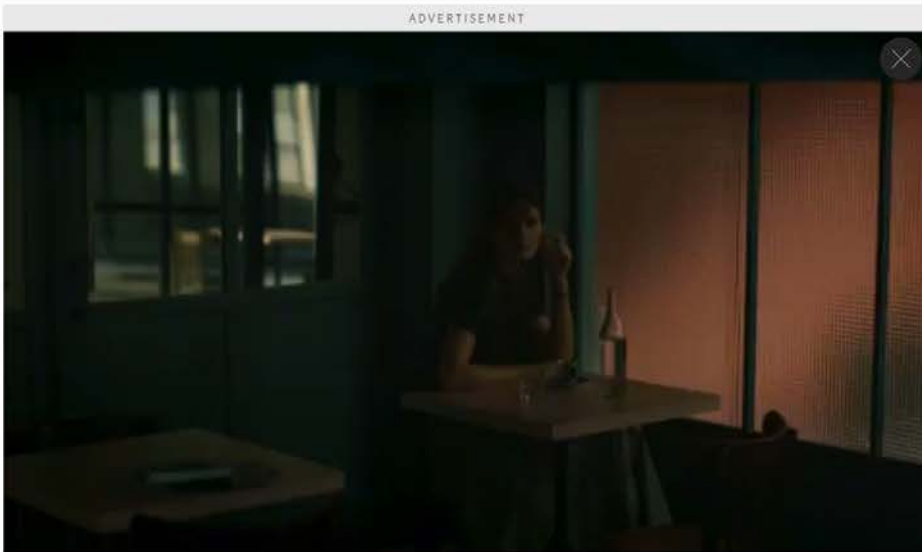


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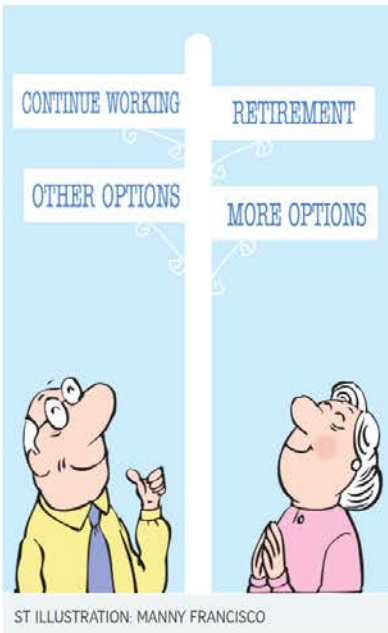


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According to researchers, life expectancy has been increasing by about three months each year or about 21/2 years every decade.



**It is possible and feasible for older workers to extend their working lives. This proposal often meets with resistance from society and policymakers because of ageism and misconceptions about old age. However, it is now being increasingly recognised that age is not a reliable indicator when judging a worker's potential employability.**

In places like Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, Switzerland, Italy and Australia, average life expectancies are 83 to 84 years and they go up even more if you survive to 65.

Singapore has one of the highest life expectancies in the world.

Therefore, with long-lived societies, retirement at age 65 has to be reframed. Many people in these societies live nearly one-third of their lives after retirement. For many of them, retirement at 65 is not economically feasible.

In the words of Stanford economist John Shoven, "the reality is that few workers can fund a 30-year retirement with a 40-year career".

A post-work life of just leisure cannot sustain one's coffers or nourish the spirit.

Work is essential to a person's well-being and has an anchoring function. Even if work is a little unpleasant and arduous, it provides social contacts and wards off social isolation.

The benefits of continuing to work in old age are immense for the individual and society. Studies of healthy ageing suggest that older adults who are engaged in paid or unpaid work have delayed mortality, are less likely to experience various physical and mental illnesses and are more likely to have a strong sense of identity and well-being.

A survey in Canada found that paid employment





was the most satisfying activity for people over 65.

In his book *The Grapes Of Wrath*, John Steinbeck expressed brilliantly the need to work. Many older people want a more meaningful role and a continued purpose in life.

The life course in modern times has been divided into fixed stages. In high-income settings, these are typically childhood, an educational period of life, a defined period of working age and then retirement. Yet, these are social constructs that have little physiological basis.

Also, the idea that learning is something that should occur only during the early stages of life reflects outdated employment patterns where people are trained for one role and then expected to remain with the same employer for the rest of their working lives - the iron-ricebowl concept.

Instead, let us reframe the life course with the longevity dividend that has become our new normal.

The anticipation of living longer might allow people to have and raise children earlier and then start a career at age 35 to 40 and to change career paths at any stage in life. Or perhaps people could start work early and then choose to retire for a while at 35 and then re-enter the workforce after that.

One consequence of the rigid framing of the life course is that the extra years that accrue from longevity are often considered as simply extending the period of retirement.

Instead, retirement should evolve into variegated choices that are more flexible and meaningful. People should consider different ways of approaching retirement where one might not exit the labour market entirely at any point of time. Skills should be used, otherwise, they get lost.

There are changes in the ageing brain that make it ideal for work in creative areas.

We, therefore, could be promoting not retirement, but transition at age 65 when older people can express themselves in a creative domain for the betterment of themselves and of society.

Also, fixed retirement ages are not reasonable. One of the hallmarks of older age is diversity, and chronological age is only loosely associated with levels of functioning. People with health problems may need to retire earlier, whereas most people could easily work longer.

Professor Axel Borsch-Supan from the Munich Centre for the Economics of Ageing debunks the myth that older workers are not as productive as younger ones. He says that based on 1.2 million observations, age and experience beat youth and inexperience. He urges countries with an ageing population to "exploit unused labour capacity" as the top priority if they want to see continued economic growth.

Thus, it is possible and feasible for older workers to extend their working lives. This proposal often meets with resistance from society and policymakers because of ageism and misconceptions about old age.

However, it is now being increasingly recognised that age is not a reliable indicator when judging a worker's potential employability.

Being a surgeon myself, the subject of retirement of doctors is close to my heart.

I will, therefore, refer to an editorial in the well-regarded *British Medical Journal*. The article talks about the difficulty of older doctors being able to continue in a part-time medical or academic capacity if they would like to do so. Requirements for reappraisal and other barriers are discouraging some from considering part-time work after retirement.

Some important clinical skills decline with age, especially those that depend on manual dexterity, but others do not or may improve, such as diagnostic skills and clinical judgment.

Of course, patients' needs and safety must be considered, but if older doctors keep up to date, then 40 years of investment in training and development of these older doctors should not go to waste.

Policymakers, employers, unions and society need a paradigm shift in attitudes towards age, wage earning and "retirement".

A life course perspective to work, employment, training and welfare is essential to building a society for all ages.

An unknown wise person has said: "Growing old is compulsory. Retirement from work is discretionary."

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Straits Times on September 02, 2019, with the headline 'Retirement age should be more flexible and meaningful'. [Print Edition](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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