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Post-divorce, Straight into the Workforce Boomer Women are flocking back to the office

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Six years ago, Denise found herself in an unanticipated position. Newly divorced, in her mid-50s and in need of a means to support herself after a 30-year hiatus from full-time work, Denise was initially worried about her prospects.

“When you get into your 50s, now you have the freedom to do what you want, but you’re juggling the age factor. It’s different for a woman. There’s an assumption that men get older and wiser, while women get menopausal.”

She decided to apply for a job to teach English in Bangkok. Desperate for a fresh start and a chance to move on from the rawness of her breakup, she packed up her belongings and moved to Southeast Asia. After her first year abroad, in love with her adopted country’s charms, she found a full-time position at a five-star hotel, where she continues to work.

Denise’s case might sound extraordinary, but as the late-life divorce rate ascends, as people are living longer and healthier, and as the empty nest no longer dictates joining Mahjong foursomes for entertainment, women in late midlife are being drawn back into full-time employment.

Susan Eng, vice-president of Advocacy at the Canadian Association for Retired People, says that we should get used to the idea that women will be making major career changes later and later in life. “The previous stereotype was that at a certain age you just don’t start anything new. But you’re going to see more and more women getting back to work.”

According to Barbara Mitchell, associate professor of sociology and gerontology at Simon Fraser University, this particular transition has not been studied. “We know it happens, at least anecdotally. The previous generation were socialized to be more traditional homemakers, whereas the Baby Boomers grew up in a time of social change and opportunities for women.”

According to Statistics Canada, labour force growth has been concentrated among ageing Boomer women. Between 1999 and 2005, almost 80% of labour force growth was accounted for by women aged 45 to 64, with half of the women 55 years of age or older.

In November, Status of Women Canada (SWC) allocated funds to Transition 55, a Quebec City-based program to help women aged 55 to 65 with workplace re-entry. Nanci-Jean Waugh, director of communications for SWC, says there are a number of reasons a woman might return to full-time work in late midlife -- and that they’re often related to the loss of a male breadwinner through death or divorce.

[But Lynne O’Connor, professional career and life coach, says she has seen clients who want to get back into](#)

the game after decades of being at home -- not because they need the money, but because they're looking for a new challenge. "I had one woman who just devoted herself to her children and the community for close to 20 years and decided that now that the children were university-bound, she wanted to use those skills in a workplace capacity."

Re-entering the workforce after a lengthy hiatus can be liberating. In the absence of child-rearing responsibilities, women have the opportunity to focus on personal development. But it can also present unique challenges. Colleen Clarke, a career consultant, says that there can be major obstacles to re-entry. "You're out of the loop. I would imagine most people haven't taken courses, read industry journals and continued to attend conferences."

Kristin Morrison, director of the Career Foundation in Toronto, recommends upgrading computer skill but says self-esteem can be an issue regardless of skill set. She recommends volunteering -- for those who can afford to work without pay -- to help build confidence. "Older workers underestimate their skills. They're worried about what employers will think of them, and they're worried about the age discrimination they may face."

Ms. Mitchell says the lifting of mandatory retirement will probably encourage more women to return to the workforce in late mid-life. "If there's this clock ticking away why should they bother investing in a new career? Employers might also be more responsive to hiring women who want to work full-time and move up the ranks."

There is no question that women who have spent decades utilizing their skills in the family home rather than an office have much to contribute. But Ms. Clarke reminds older women that understanding workplace culture -- which may have changed significantly since their previous stint of full-time employment-- is the key to being hired. "We get interviewed based on our skills; we get hired based on how we fit. If you're moving in with a bunch of old farts, then it doesn't matter, but the workplace is full of Gen Xers and Gen Yers. If you're just going to decide one day to take off your tracksuit and put on your Armani suit and go into work, you're in for a big surprise

Lynne O'Connor,
CMF, President, Advanced Career Coaching Inc.,
www.advancedcareercoaching.com
lynne@advancedcareercoaching.com
416-232-2545