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THE THIRD AGE

Our society should retire ideas about worker age

By **ANN GOWANS**

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There is a strong tendency in our society to pigeonhole people according to their physical age. In 1889, the German leader Otto van Bismarck promoted the idea that people should stop work at a particular age and receive a small but secure pension from the state. This idea quickly spread to England and America and has become the law of the land in many countries of the world. A lot has changed since that time. We now live much longer because of the good work of public health, medical science and improved nutrition. The time has come to redefine the concept of retirement and old age.

More than 70 percent of the European economy is now based on services rather than manufacturing, said John Browne, chief executive of BP in London. Browne is quite outspoken about the idea that there is life beyond retirement, and he wants to promote this concept throughout the world of work as the service and information industries catch up with the traditional manufacturing sector.

Our country also has become much more dependent on services, and a large part of our economy is based on knowledge that has been gathered through experience. If we simply look at an employee chart and determine that because a worker has reached 60 or 65 years of age they should be shuttled off to retirement, even though they might have the knowledge to do a specific job, we are losing more than we realize. This is especially true if that person is to receive a retirement pension. It seems foolish to train someone to do a job that can be done more easily and quickly by an in-place worker even though they have reached upper middle age. The contribution of such an employee, whether it be in information, service, teaching, medicine or whatever, could be much more valuable than training someone else to step in.

Browne also points to another reason to give up a rigid idea of retirement at a certain age: a truly civilized society. Our prejudice against older people, whether they are workers or housewives, runs deep in our Western culture and has a lot more influence on our daily lives than we might realize. We tend to equate the word "young" with vitality and the future and have allowed "old" to become the code word for the past and failure. As we buy into this attitude, we fail to remember that we, too, will grow old much faster than we realize and so will become the "old" and "failed."

There are some younger folks who really work toward a retirement when they are young enough to travel a lot and make plans to move to a spot where they can enjoy a life of leisure. As it turns out, however, a majority of those who are thinking about retirement really want some kind of interesting and engaging work to be part of their retirement planning. Keeping the mind



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busy is gaining in importance as we realize using our brains is just as important as using our bodies.

The truth is we all must include economic reality into any retirement plan we make, and the usual choice is to either accept a reduced income after retirement or keep some gainful employment after we leave our everyday jobs.

The expected employer-driven pension received upon retirement is quickly becoming a thing of the past. People are also trying in a number of countries around the world to change laws so that they don't discriminate against older workers. This will make it easier to either hang onto the jobs we have or to enter the employment sector at another place after we reach "retirement age."

The boomers have some misgivings about older people "hanging onto" jobs, however. They are a large pool of folks who will need employment well into their late middle age and possibly longer. If we are to make room for them in our work force, any plan must include their long-term needs as well. Those needs should include not only income but provisions for rapidly escalating medical expenses and a society quickly moving toward inflation.

We need to make room for our children and grandchildren to move into the work force at the same time that we acknowledge the need to find some kind of useful work to keep us busy, happy, useful and healthy in our old age. A tall but vital order indeed.

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