The basic conflict: Personal values vs. public reputation

Questing boomers grapple with terms of success often set by the worlds they choose to inhabit. Reputation is squarely at the core of this struggle, and these boomers are well aware of the machinery of reputation building. However, a tension often arises between the demands of reputation management and personal needs and values. With the terms of success imposed on them, they spend their time trying to work around these demands in ways that meet their needs.

For some, these workarounds are creative manipulations of the reputation machinery itself, such as participation in online forums that heighten visibility among their peers. Others may simply take unexpected risks—for example, dropping a high-powered booking agent in favor of one that is willing to book fewer gigs. Some feel perpetually at odds with the world; others see themselves as continuously and happily finding what works best for them within the terms of their quests.

Lifestyle:
In their prime

While many of their cohort have already experienced their most productive years and are now moving into another, more relaxed phase, boomers still questing find that their quests are just now beginning to come together. As their quests begin to shape the coming years, they’ll be their “prime,” when they hope to realize visions of significant and meaningful work.

But this doesn’t mean all of these boomers are successful. What may seem like a logical weave of many strands of interest may, from another angle, look more like efforts thwarted, opportunities stymied, and plans unexpectedly disrupted. They are persistently independent, and the women’s liberation movement profoundly shaped the women represented in this type. They often feel younger than their age and associate with younger people, in part because they have resequenced their lives and adjusted expectations of what success means and when it will arrive. Productively provides a rubric for them to measure both their day-to-day lives and their overarching goals.

Expectations:
Hard-earned success

These boomers work deliberately toward hard-earned success. They expect to achieve at least some measure of success that will support them into their next phase of life, but they’re far from certain about that. Part of their uncertainty stems from a lifetime of frustration: external events, competing cohorts and generations, and disruptive life events have repeatedly derailed their plans. Awareness of the limits of their bodies also contributes to uncertainty, tempering their quests. They are turning out to be the steadies that they know will be crucial in achieving goals.

As a result, these boomers hedge their bets. They pour energy into their quests, but maintain well-defined alternative scenarios and backup plans. If the country’s economy and political climate cannot support their chosen niches, they are willing to reposition themselves between and across sectors, or even move out of the country.

Questing is about reaching for a goal, striving for something just beyond one’s grasp. Unlike boomers who are thinking about winding down, those still questing have either started their careers late, redefined goals, or have somehow gotten off track before they were able to find solidification in terms of public worth. These boomers tend to keep their options open, to be agile and adaptable. They are both individualists and group members, with a strong need to go against the flow and take risks, while simultaneously trying to conform to society’s definition of success. At this stage in their lives, they are reaching out and expanding their horizons.

Work identity drives these boomers, an identity still in the making for most. For their quest in something for their future, they actively distance themselves from their pasts.
The Action Ecology illustrates the complexity with which boomers anticipate, plan for, and deal with changes in their lives. The inner portion of the ecology highlights resources, sorted into four categories: people, information, institutions, and capitals. The outer ring, organized around seven dimensions of decision making, describes practices and strategies through which boomers put their resources into action. Finally, there are the “decisions in suspension,” questions that these boomers don’t have answers to just yet.

### Decisions in Suspension:
- When to switch to Plan B?
- Where to settle down?
- How to reform old institutions?
- How to best manage a public image?
- How to postpone the limits of time and aging?

### Extended Capacity
- A sense of accomplishment

### Adapting the Self
- Managing weight
- Cultivating strength and gender expression
- Building public personas online

### Changing the Surroundings
- Matching immediate surroundings to mental states

### Resequencing Life Stages
- Matching immediate surroundings to mental states

### Enacting the Narrative
- Pursuing tenure
- Questing for success and recognition
- Moving for better schools for children

### Authoring One’s Path
- Maintaining an identity of a single person
- Becoming a “migratory mom”
- Feeling uncomfortable with traditional life stages

### Building the Instrumental Network
- Building new social networks
- Seeking medical knowledge through informed friends
The Dimensions of Decision Making

The boomers we talked to helped us discover the key dimensions of the seven big stories that emerge at the intersection of aging, cohort, and period effects. For each story, we found a pair of defining actions—two poles of behavior that turn the stories into scales. We then used these scales to define the action types, each of which represents a unique profile.

Extended capacity

To extend their capacities and pursue their quests, these boomers focus on their public appearances—both physical and digital—and their internal sense of self-improvement. Even their change of surroundings is geared to shifting their mental states and identities.

Rerequencing life stages

Questing boomers are torn between striving to fulfill roles and expectations, and seeking new ways to become and understand new authentic paths. They experience frustration as they resequence their life stages from two directions: struggling with critiques of their attempts to live within established narratives, and authoring narratives to circumvent insufficient ones that are not accepted by larger society.

Self-help 2.0

These boomers think from the points of view of their communities, both online and offline. They find satisfaction and meaning through civic engagement and arrange their lives in such a way that their work, their faith, and their self-care feed back into their communities. In part, caring for themselves means living and working with communities they feel need and appreciate their efforts.

New sociability

The act of networking is a central life-organizing strategy for this group of boomers. Not the primary way they acquire work and obtain their status as authorities in their field. Beyond that, their networks and the act of networking is a tool for defining and maintaining their identities.

Re-institutioning

In another dynamic tension, these boomers are dedicated to salvaging old institutions with the tools of new ones. To them, established institutions of faith and education can be transformed into civic action and social justice. They see these old institutions in peril and turn to novel organizational forms and communities to refresh their value.

Wealth generation

While they openly and explicitly discuss perceived risk, these boomers are hardly risk averse. They have faith in divine forces and a sometimes tattered but still strong faith that their efforts will generate success. At the same time, they manage risk by generating detailed scenarios and alternatives for what their choices might entail.

Global transparency

As they advance their quests in regard to their work ambitions and life trajectories, these boomers also embark on geographic quests. None of them feel that where they live now is truly “home,” and they reach outward, away from their places of origin. Several of them talk about retiring, or even seeking work abroad or traveling incessantly. Their visions are of ever-expanding and global horizons of possibility.
Each of these profiles describes a person who embodies the Still Questing action type. These three personal stories best illustrate the decision-making lens of the action type but are not the only interviewees who shaped the type. The profiles represent actual people and their words, although their names and some details about their lives have been changed to protect their identities.

Leanne Williams

Age: 46
Urban Northeast

As a university professor, Leanne Williams is behind schedule on the tenure track to becoming a full professor. She decided in her thirties to go back to school for a Ph.D., believing that mass retirement of the boomers would create job openings for the next generation, of which she considers herself a part. She is disillusioned that so many boomers aren’t retiring “on schedule,” blocking opportunities for her. Nevertheless, a clear path of publishing and building her academic reputation stretches ahead of her, and she works diligently to walk that path with success. Leanne recently moved to a major urban center with her female partner, where they have a rent-controlled flat in a high-rent neighborhood. They feel themselves to be outsiders in this neighborhood; their “best friend” is a homeless person who camps on the street not far from them. They are, however, active members of a local community of faith, which focuses on social action projects such as providing a shelter for homeless “ queer kids.” She and her partner are committed to a life of social justice issues.

On quests and momentum:
“The main change will be a sense of accomplishment that may replace the sense of questing that I feel now. I hate to say anxiety, but I have a real sense of time passing really quickly and I need to get stuff out. That also leads to a kind of momentum where I can do bigger things.”

On choices and opportunities:
“In a lot of ways, I chose things that were very difficult. I chose a really difficult profession that takes a lot of years, and it’s just a huge, long curve in getting to the place that I want to be. I have really incredibly high demands in terms of what I wanted from a relationship. I chose a really hard place to live.”

On finding a stride:
“I would call this the prime years. They’re really good years in terms of things that matter to me … I have a good stable relationship that I like a lot, I live in a place that I like a lot, I have a job that I like a lot. I can work on my research and my writing. I can be involved with the shelter, my community of faith and that work—social justice issues.”

In spite of her very marketable skills, Sabrina Levitt’s career has yet to take shape. A single mom with two master’s degrees, she has worked in traditional corporate, startup, and nonprofit arenas in desirable fields. In spite of this resume, she has been unable to achieve a steady income since escaping the boredom and perceived anti-Semitism of the upper Midwest for a more tolerant area of the West Coast in 2003. In fact, her career began to fall apart even before her move when the company she worked for hit hard times. Sabrina made a series of risky moves, none of which have yet succeeded. She rents a comfortable house in a suburban community, which she chose to provide her son a good public-school education. In order to connect with the school community and mitigate the risk of her move, Sabrina decided to serve on the school board. When her son enters college in three years, she looks forward to trading the house for a studio apartment and lots of travel. Downscaling her housing is not a way to secure any sort of retirement, however; she has several scenarios for rebuilding her work persona, from conventional and undesirable positions to innovative and desirable ones. She spends much of her time networking, maintaining a professional Web site for herself and working with local nonprofit organizations that she hopes will lead to professional opportunities. While these efforts require constant maintenance of a public persona, she feels that she is not a public-facing person.

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On communities and priorities: "I'm spending way too much time in these online communities and with this other community; I really have to spend the time looking for work, putting my own stuff together, working on my product idea, trying to find VC's [Venture Capitalists] or angels who are interested in it, if the picking and really generating money.

On financial expectations: "I go talk to these VC's and they say, 'Well, it's only like $15,000. What's wrong with you?' And I'm like, 'I'm a single mom Gen-X person who's had to pay her own way through freaking life and I don't have $15,000!'… I basically generate cognitive dissonance over the idea of, how could I be competent and not have disposable income?"

On labels and phases: "I am not an empty-nester. I'm a single person with a son in college. I think there's going to be a big upswing of people who are single people with children in college. Not empty-nesters, but kind of second young adulthoods almost—migratory moms. He goes, and then I don't have to have a house. I live in a freaking shoebox for all I care. I can travel 100% of the time."

On retirement: "I kind of laugh at my friends who are baby boomers who talk about their strategy for retirement and how they're so upset that it's going to be here then until they're 60, 65, 70, whatever, and so on and so forth. I don't know. I think people are going to retire. What can you talking about? I go until I die Mrs. Editha."

Three years ago, Faye Jones gave up a secure job as a business manager to combine singing with coaching and become a freelance self-improvement personality. Since then, her life has been about building her repertoire and her reputation. Raised in a large family of gospel-singers in the deep South, she left the roots-driven church of her youth in favor of a new age church in the heart of a major city. She's also actively engaged with professional and avocational speaking clubs, which help her to hone her skills. Never married, Faye has a man in her life only on weekends, when they enjoy the outdoors together. When she left her job, she downscaled her house to a more affordable condominium in a suburb. However most of her social life is still centered in the city, now a long commute from her home. She is happiest when she's reading, and reading is the path to developing the materials that she incorporates into her work. While she's been quite successful professionally, she's also beginning to tire of travel and is taking some time off while she waits for the next phase to take shape.

On the faith to transition: "A lot of people say if you're going to make a transition, keep your job and then just dabble in what you're doing. Well, I have to admit I did that a little bit because I was doing some writing on the side—this was definitely stepping out on faith and doing it. I had a vision and I said God, 'Look, you and me will get through this together.'"

On independence as a woman: "I think I grew up in an era where women are more independent. And so when I was born and being brought up, this is the training that I had—that I'm an equal, that I have a voice, I have an opinion… I don't need a man to sustain me. I don't need a man to make me know who I am."

On physical limitations: "I see a deadline here. There are not going to be many years where I am able to do things physically, so I've really come to terms with the things I won't be able to do in 20 years… I think the main thing is to be aware of your body, to be aware of any change that occurs, and have a plan for any changes."
Action Ecology:

The Action Ecology illustrates the complexity with which boomers anticipate, plan for, and deal with changes in their lives. The inner portion of the ecology highlights resources, sorted into four categories: people, information, institutions, and capitals. The Action ecology illustrates the complexity with which boomers anticipate, plan for, and deal with changes in their lives. The "boomer action" reveals their struggles and accomplishments. Below is an excerpt from the document:

At a glance

Quoting boomers weigh decisions against well-articulated icons and equally well-articulated alternative strategies. When they feel the time is right, however, they take a leap of faith and pursue the most desirable course.

Still Questing

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Expectations:

Hard-earned success

These boomers work deliberately toward experiences that will yield the most productive and enjoyable life possible. They have chosen niches, they are willing to reposition themselves and their lives for the sake of their own ambitions. They are no longer running to catch the steam that they know will not carry them all the way.

Questions

The basic conflict:
Personal values vs. public reputation

Quoting boomers grapple with terms of success and failure in the world they shape today. Reputation is squarely at the core of the struggle, and these boomers are well aware of the lengths they often feel compelled to go against the grain to secure the respect they want rational to the core of the struggle, and these boomers are well aware of the lengths they often feel compelled to go against the grain to secure the respect they want.