

Baby Boomers

TO THE FUTURE
TO THE PAST

Still Questioning

Work identity drives these boomers, an identity still in the making for most. On their quest for something in their futures, they actively distance themselves from their pasts.

Questioning is about reaching for a goal, striving for something just beyond one's grasp. Unlike boomers who are thinking about winding down, those still questioning have either started their careers late, redefined goals, or have somehow gotten off track before they were able to find satisfaction in terms of public worth. These boomers look forward, not backward. Generally well educated and highly skilled, they draw on their competencies 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.

The basic conflict:

Personal values vs. public reputation

Questioning 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.

Lifestage:

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 questioning find that the many hectic threads of their lives are just now beginning to come together. As their quests take shape, the coming years will 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. Productivity 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 fear running out of the steam 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 back-up 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.



Action Ecology:

Still Questing

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 our seven dimensions of decision making, describe 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?

Global Transparency

Ever-expanding horizons

FOCUSING ON THE LOCAL

- Contributing to current neighborhoods and communities

ENGAGING WITH THE GLOBAL

- Seeking work with extensive travel
- Looking for retirement options overseas
- Escaping places and states of origin

Extended Capacity

A sense of accomplishment

ADAPTING THE SELF

- Managing weight
- Cultivating strength and gender expression
- Building public personalities online

CHANGING THE SURROUNDINGS

- Matching immediate surroundings to mental states

Resequencing Life Stages

On the fringe

ENACTING THE NARRATIVE

- Pursuing tenure
- Questing for success and recognition
- Moving for better schools for children
- Fighting for gay marriage

AUTHORING ONE'S PATH

- Maintaining an identity of a single person
- Becoming a “migratory mom”
- Feeling uncomfortable with traditional life stages
- Identifying with younger cohorts

Wealth Generation

Faith and preparation

MITIGATING RISK

- Having multiple back-up plans
- Maintaining flexible relationships to place
- Constantly reviewing and naming risks

CULTIVATING FAITH

- Praying for success
- Leaving stable jobs and communities
- Taking leaps of faith in new ventures and places



PEOPLE

Neighbors
Parents
Siblings
Community members
Church members
Supportive partners



INFORMATION

Internet communities
Internet search tools
Word of mouth
Mailed brochures

Resources



CAPITALS

Neighborhood networks
Spiritual capital
State pensions
Versatile skills



INSTITUTIONS

Communities of faith
State programs
Musical groups
Medical providers
Civic groups

Self-Help 2.0

Community identity

BECOMING A CONNECTED CITIZEN

- Joining social justice communities and non-profits
- Sitting on community councils and foundations
- Pursuing self-help as a profession

Re-Institutioning

New tools fix old problems

REPURPOSING THE OLD

- Pushing for judicial system reform
- Supporting public schools
- Using traditional medical providers

INVESTING IN THE NEW

- Engaging with experimental online communities
- Designing novel, interdisciplinary start-ups
- Forging unique self-help personalities

New Sociability

Networks are everything

BUILDING THE INSTRUMENTAL NETWORK

- Networking for job opportunities
- Building strong 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 senses of self-improvement. Even their change of surroundings is geared to shifting their mental states and identities.

Resequencing life stages



Questing boomers are torn between striving to fulfill roles and expectations, and working even harder to define and defend their own 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 so 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



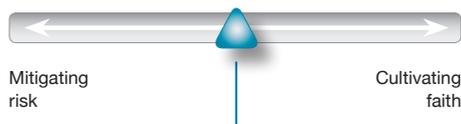
The act of networking is a central life-organizing strategy for this group of boomers. It is the primary way they acquire work and obtain their status as authorities in their field. Beyond that, their networks and the act of networking is a tool for defining and maintaining their identities.

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 are instruments of 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 risks, 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.

Profiles & Quotations

Each of these profiles describes a person who embodies the Still Questioning 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." Born and raised in the South, Leanne sees the city as liberation from her family, her upbringing, and the values they encompassed. She identifies herself as "from the city," not as a southerner. But she also sees it as unsustainable: she and her partner are considering a move to Europe, perhaps Amsterdam or England, to hedge against rising rents and to find a more sympathetic social environment.

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."

Sabrina Levitt

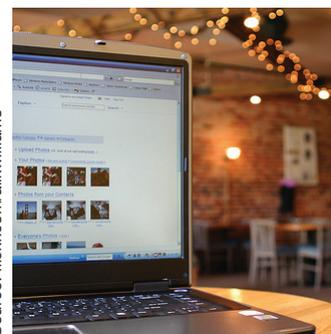
Age: 45
Suburban West Coast

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 insists that she is not a public-facing person.

Source: flickr.com/slack13



Source: flickr.com/alkwilliams



Faye Jones

Age: 59

Suburban South

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, the pitching 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 who have 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 take them until they’re blah, blah, blah age to retire and it’s so not fair—this whole Jones generation thing. They should just get over themselves. I’m not going to retire. What are you talking about? I go until I do euthanasia.”

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 she uses to hone her skills, make contacts, and make friends. Never married, Faye has a man in her life only on weekends, when they enjoy the outdoors together. When she left her old 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 training on the side ... It was definitely stepping out on faith and doing it ... I sat down and I told 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’ll be able to do things physically, so I’ve really oriented myself toward the things I want to do physically that maybe 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 changes that occur, and then to take care of those changes.”



Source: flickr.com/walmlink

Decisions in Context

At a glance

Questioning boomers weigh decisions against well-articulated risks 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.

Work:

Meaning and determination

These boomers have chosen difficult paths of work, opting for creative combinations and ambitious goals rather than well-established avenues. They wrestle with the implications of those decisions on their finances, their public images, and their life plans. They have chosen paths that demand particular kinds of public images, yet the reality of their personal values are also very important to them, and they often feel that the two don't necessarily align. They try to resolve this tension by focusing on personal development and meaning in their work, and cherishing the independence they have made for themselves. They continue to strive for new professional and vocational accomplishments, and retirement seems both financially unattainable and personally dissatisfying to them.

Housing:

Weighing changes

Their quests have brought these boomers far from their original homes, and continue to drive them to be mobile and flexible. They have come to their current homes through personal values: good schools, cosmopolitan environments, or places conducive to thought and growth. They persistently worry that they are overextending their means in their current living situations, and are open to and actively anticipating moving to smaller homes. Their ambitions for travel push them towards flexibility, but at the same time, they are still searching for a place that feels like home.

Food:

Being careful

As with other decisions, choosing food and eating environments means balancing values and necessity, and managing public identities. All of these boomers aspire to eat in ways that maintain their health and keep their weight in check. For some of them, these efforts are intertwined with complicated health conditions. They find they must struggle for the time to prepare food in a way that is consistent with their health goals but that doesn't interfere with their life goals. The places they buy and eat food also reflect their cosmopolitan identities: farmer's markets and coffee shops are important symbols of who they are questing to be.

Finances:

Struggling for stability

Financial stability is a sore spot for these boomers. For some, an inability to build monetary resources in their chosen enterprises is a concrete barrier; for others, it's a psychological wall against which they compare themselves to their more stable peers. While they feel financially competent, they find themselves unable to act on the advice they give themselves. When capital does come their way, they are likely to pour it into the things of value to them: their work endeavors, self-improvement, and the well-being of those they care about. Saving for retirement seems to them a luxury reserved for those with easier paths and circumstances, and they resent the moral judgments around financial management.

Health:

Watching the clock

These boomers are aware of their limits, and anxious that their bodies may not be able to see them through their ambitions. They monitor their bodies carefully, and when faced with illness or disruptions of their well-being, they first attempt to diagnose themselves before turning to mainstream medical providers. They have some strong tendencies toward denial, but relationships with friends and family provide the tipping points for them to seek care. Once in contact with medical professionals, they are heavily engaged and seek information, resources, and second opinions.