

Over-50: How We Keep Working

By Jane Genova

Preface by Taryn Simpson

Dedicated to Amy C. Karnilowicz who got me back working in 2003

PREFACE

When Jane Genova had sent me her concept for coaching and conducting workshops for those over-50 in this new economy, I thought to myself: *Pure brilliance*. My first career had been in Human Resources. I myself am over-50. That means that I know the power and potential for those of us over-50, including myself.

After all, we have the decades of experience in the workplace. We bore witness to all the fads such as quality circles, the excesses like way too complex investment vehicles, and the emerging realities such as doing more with less manpower. We have survived and often thrived amidst all that.

Therefore, despite our undertow of angst, we are convinced we can plant ourselves in even rocky soil, start sprouting buds, and eventually bloom. A growing number of us are distinct late bloomers like Hillary Clinton, Clint Eastwood, Pema Chordon, and David

Letterman. Incidentally, University of Chicago economics researcher David W. Galenson confirms there is such a phenomenon.

We over-50 can and likely will create new markets, new jobs, new models for the workplace. In this protean economy, we are the capitalist version of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. This, not the birth of democracy, may be the biggest experiment Americans will live through and likely designate a national holiday to celebrate.

A few years later, Jane Genova then told me that those over-50 wanted her to publish a book on the topic. She asked me to write the Preface. I was: *Beyond Honored*. Now I had joined the other Stay-Working Fighters on the front lines.

Here is what I see happening. The economic uncertainty and volatility had initially thrown some of us, but not for long. As we embrace this as The New Normal we recognize that whether we want to be stars or simply keep working, we have to approach and do work differently. That concept of working for The Man for 40 years and retiring on a cushy pension and health benefits in addition to Social Security all are by now an Aesop's Fable. That concept lies along with the dinosaur remains collecting dust in the Smithsonian. Then there is the mantra of four or five generations working side-by-side for the first time in human history. All I can say is, not for long, my friend.

The workplace is changing faster than anyone would have guessed. As a former Human Resources leader turned ghostwriter and novelist, I hold firm in my forecasting that large

corporations are a thing of the past. Gone are the days of becoming and staying an “employee.” While companies may hire a few key employees, the vast majority will be consultants. There will be no "The Man," only peers pulling together to solve problems, cost-efficiently. No more health benefits, no more retirement benefits, no more employee AND employer taxes. To each his own, mono a mono.

Having made those bold statements, I am convinced that the generation best equipped to handle this dramatic change in corporate America are the Baby Boomers. We did, after all, learn how to operate computers on the job. We created the idea of “overtime.” We thrived on burning the candle at both ends. And we greeted the new millennium first hand.

We are the generation of change. It only makes sense that the generation who has seen technology take on a life of its own becomes the example of learning how to work after the age of 50. I promise you will refer to this book time and time again to capture every pearl of wisdom. In this day and age, it only makes sense to experience transformation in your career. That piece of common career sense comes from a musician turned accountant, turned Human Resources expert, turned Information Technology consultant, turned ghostwriter/novelist, turned video consultant/creator. Regarding the latter, here is the video trailer I created for Jane Genova’s novel “The Fat Guy From Greenwich” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIWY1o2Efxk>.

Taryn Simpson
Pulitzer Prize Competitor for “The Mango Tree Café, Loi Kroh Road”
[Http://author-tarynsimpson.blogspot.com](http://author-tarynsimpson.blogspot.com)

INTRODUCTION

We over-50 represent nearly a third of the U.S. workforce [Source: U.S. Chamber of Commerce.] Most of us want to and/or need to keep it just that way, that is, employed at a job or self-employed. Currently, there are a growing number of versions of being employed.

We work 80 hours a week as partners in a law firm. Those 80 hours include dinners with prospects as we develop new business.

We are Chief Executive Officers of the Fortune 500.

We are self-employed.

We have been at the same part-time job at a major corporation for 20 years.

We are free agents employed just-in-time by temporary agencies. Some of our bookings last 18 months or more.

We are embedded in underground economies, walking dogs, running errands, transporting those who cannot drive to the casino.

We are novelists, psychics, and actors.

Likely, we will not be doing what we are doing now until we decide to stop working.

We sense that. Already change in our employment status may have come unexpectedly and grabbed us by the throat. We promise ourselves and our families: *That will not happen again*. But change, usually unanticipated, will. Again and again and again. And we will bounce back from that and find another way to make a living or to prevent our needing to dig into our retirement funds. That is the way it has played out, for many of us who have been rocked by career shocks, large and small.

That is what this book is about: Keeping us working, no matter what. Even if the U.S. economy stabilizes and begins to grow in a consistent manner, our world of work will remain a rollercoaster. Companies will fold, outsource, downsize, switch strategic focus. Customers will develop new tastes, values, and price points. Clients will die, retire, get fired, merge, or adapt technologies we do not excel in. We will discover we are bottom-fishing in our familiar niche business.

Some of that rollercoaster ride will land us on top. Our talent in delivering motivational speeches catapults us into the big time. We earn \$30,000 a speech. Our client's software is purchased by a Fortune 100 company and we are needed to tell that story in press releases, tweets, videos for YouTube, and white papers. We receive a promotion to become the Chief Executive Officer, after being a shrewd number-two who stayed in the

background for years. Our new niche in advising the Y Generation on investing grows so quickly we have to hire other financial consultants. We are considering if we should create a franchise.

That means there is no returning to settling in. Not for us. Not now. Not ever. Getting too comfortable will not be in the cards, not ever again.

There had been that Ford Motor slogan in the mid 1990s. It was: Quality is job number-one. For us over-50, keeping working is job number-one. Not that it is all that difficult. Actually I have come to relish the strategic and tactical chase after work.

What is tough is that it is not what we over-50 had become used to. Up until the past several years, our career paths, ranging from journalism and law to plumbing and construction, have been linear, predictable, and set up for us to consume. There the jobs were, sitting right there on the shelf. We took the job we wanted and consumed it as the good Americans we were. Our conditioning had been to belly up to the economy and take what we wanted, including a job, career path, or even shot at self employment.

If one industry or company disappeared, there were ready-made formulas to head in another direction. They included degree programs, certificate training, gaining experience under the radar in an ally's office, and going to work in our brother-in-law's business. As the MAD MAGAZINE mascot Alfred E. Newman used to say: *What me worry*. Not much and not for long.

No longer is that the situation. Increasingly we are discovering that we have to produce our careers, often from bits and pieces of raw material. They are not on the shelf in any career shop.

When there were still prestigious freelance journalism assignments to be had, Laurel Touby tried some of them out in media capital Manhattan. No fool, she sensed that was not going to be a lucrative way to establish herself. She looked at her strengths. From the South, she had a grace and charm which pulled people toward her. That led to hosting casual media parties. During those get-togethers she learned what the artsy crowd needed. That ranged from low-cost skills training to medical benefits. The result was her web business MediaBistro.com. She built it. She found funding to expand it. And eventually she sold it for millions. Touby is currently on sabbatical in Europe. When she returns she might be putting together the whatever for her next venture.

In 2005, I noticed there was no digital counterpart of the print Dominick Dunne who covered courtroom drama. For years I have been analyzing his mashup of bundling strong personal values, gossip, trusted sources, and going light on legal complexity. This was two years into my own journey away from being primarily a corporate ghostwriter/speechwiter and toward social media strategy and content.

On my own dime, I commuted the 90 minutes from my home office in Connecticut to the courthouse in downtown Providence, Rhode Island. There the four-month Rhode Island

lead paint public nuisance trial was played out. I live-blogged it, leveraging in digital what I had picked up from Donne's print. That can be retrieved at <http://janegenova.com> under "legal."

Among the many many payoffs doing that, I learned how to "own" a territory. That territory does not just include journalistic-like coverage. It could be for a product, service, or a fresh approach to anything and everything. The rest is Genova the Barbarian, taking over areas which were or could have been controlled by old-line players.

We over-50 are not alone in having to produce our own income streams. But we have an edge. And an edge is a terrible thing to waste, particularly in an economy of scarcity versus the overflowing abundance of earlier times. The young, both in the U.S. and nations like Ireland and Spain, are having a brutal time getting in and staying in the workplace.

They lack our experience going to work. We know, for example, that employers and clients are hiring results, not a relationship. Hold the personality. We present ourselves on paper, through email, on-the-phone, and in-person as demonstrating we can do *that* specific job or assignment. No, we do not roll ourselves out generically.

We also know how to assess what is, what could be emerging, and what has been declining. That positions us to cash in on trends. Our employers and clients sense that.

That makes us more valuable in their eyes. The new-economy game is about creating value.

In addition, we are all grown up, at least in the ways of the world. We can smell a scam, fad, or unneeded frill a mile away. No, we do not waste employers's, clients's or our own time in enthusiasms.

We discern what could yield results. When those results do not come, we leap in with course correction – confidently.

A third advantage is that we have outgrown most of youth's ego needs, including for excessive material rewards. By time we reach over-50, we have been able to calculate how much ego costs the workplace. It probably has cost us plenty ourselves in our own careers. Those include unnecessary errors of judgment, feuds, inability to let go, and obsession with compensation and perks. One might say: We over-50 are professionally all grown-up.

In addition, currently there are fewer of the constraints of aging. More work is cognitive and creative, not physical. Research shows that when it comes to cognitive learning, those 49-72 did as well as those 18-25, in terms of grades. There was the plus that the older group had a higher rate of completing the study programs [Source: California State University.]

The law is also on our side. About two years ago, the law firm Sidley Austin, in a lawsuit filed by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], settled for \$27.5 million with 32 partners. The complaint was age discrimination. The EEOC has been a tiger on the matter of aging. In January 2010, it filed a lawsuit against law firm Kelley Drye & Warren on behalf of a 79-year-old partner and “similarly situated employees.” The complaint is age discrimination.

Yes, on one hand, we have plenty going for us. On the other, there are obstacles. They can be compressed for simplicity into two.

One is the mindset we had developed during predictable, affluent times. It is the expectation of progress, on all levels. We have come to assume that every aspect of our professional and personal lives will improve. The standard of living will continue to rise. We can debt-out the future. After all, inflation makes it foolish not to spend too much now and save too little. Eventually, we will bump into the right investment advisor for us, when we need to be thinking that way. No question, the ability to deal with disappointment, setbacks, and career catastrophe atrophied.

Of course, that assumption is complete delusion now. If we uttered it in front of family or friends, they would recommend that we “see a therapist.” The only thing that seems to progress is our shrewdness about making a living.

Sometimes that is all it will be: Just the ability to pay our bills.

Other times, it will be financial success beyond our wildest dreams. But there is nothing expected or automatic about it. We do it, every bit of it. We are responsible for making a living and how satisfying and lucrative that living will be.

The other constraint is the socialization some of us received in our Fortune 500 careers, professional-services firms, and upper-middle-class communities. The message was clear: Hustling was counterproductive to success. The ethos of WASP or elite grace, calm and seeming in control prevailed. We overheard the delighted gossip about so-and-so. He or she had not been offered the position or received the promotion or the assignment because of coming across way too hungry. Style was everything. It always trumped substance. Business wanted to appear classy. It did not someone it perceived as “rough around the edges,” “working class,” or “trying too hard.”

Currently, we have to break a sweat. What we are learning is not to bother ourselves one bit about who sees us going after what we want. Professional self-consciousness has gone the way of the DOS operating system. We over-50 are the generation who embrace the wisdom of Henry Ford I. He observed that we never complain and we never explain. Right now we do not explain that, yes, we are hungry. It is no one else’s business. It is, yes, our business, literally. We may appear rough around the edges, working class, and trying too hard. Employers and clients *love* to see that.

In this book we will deal with these advantages, obstacles, and more. Those who have read drafts of the book have told me that it will be the dog-eared bible for those over-50 who intend to keep working. Specifically, what will we gain in insight and behavior change from this book? Here are some of those takeaways:

- ✓ Moving more easily from the past to the now. Being in the present gets us to the future. Being in the past gets us labeled as “old.”

- ✓ Developing the habit of going-for-it. That is the essence of hustle: Spotting, pouncing on, and exploiting opportunity.

- ✓ Moving forward without narrowly defined goals. When we are waiting for X to happen, we may miss that Y is opening up to be significant market space.

- ✓ Unbundling work from all the baggage it has taken on since World War II. That has included demanding from it meaning, status, sense of belonging, and even a possible vocation or “calling.”

Who can have these kinds of takeaways? All of us. That is even though we are hardly homogeneous.

Some of did not skip a beat in pursuing a marketable degree such as an M.D. or M.B.A. and following an upward trajectory.

Some of us took time out for radical politics and roads less traveled.

Some have already changed careers once or twice.

Some took their degrees to the suburbs and reared family. Many of them are re-entering the workforce.

Some made outstanding livings as plumbers and electricians.

Some have spent whole careers in one line of work such as journalism, law or human resources and have to transition to other fields.

Some have retired and returned to the work world.

What we all have in common is that we came of age in affluence and success appeared the result of careful planning and taking on the necessary protective coloring, with smoothness and class. Our challenge is to change just about everything we assumed and did to make a good living. The good news is that change is not that tough a nut to crack.

We can supplement what we read here on digital sites <http://over-50.typepad.com> and <http://careertransitions.typepad.com>.

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About The Author

