

Live retirement off the couch

We underestimate the social, psychological and emotional impact of leaving our working lives behind us, writes **Gareth Naughton**

Retirement – leaving behind the demands of working life – is a goal for most workers, but many focus too much on the financial implications of a life outside the office and ignore the emotional impact.

An unplanned and unstructured retirement is a sure-fire way to spend the remainder of your days flopped on the couch watching daytime television.

While workers look forward to their weekends for the relief they offer from the daily grind, for retirees every day can end up being Saturday and Sunday. With nothing to occupy them, they could end up like the Dowager Countess in *Downton Abbey*, asking, “What is a weekend?”

Survey figures released by the Retirement Planning Council (RPC) last week amply demonstrate that, even though people know that retirement is coming, they are ill prepared for it.

While still working, 62 per cent of those surveyed believed that the change in their financial circumstances would be the most significant challenge facing them in retirement.

Asked what they now see as their biggest challenges, half of the respondents said personal or non-financial issues. Just a quarter said money remained the most significant issue.

Ensuring you are financially secure in your retirement is obviously important, but what is less evident for many people is the need to give serious consideration to what they want from their post-work life.

Spending the day doing the crossword and watching Judge Judy dole out tough justice on afternoon television is fine for a month or two, but the honeymoon period will inevitably end and the unique charms of Cash in the Attic will begin to wear thin.

Opportunity knocks

Retirement is a significant change in anyone's life, but it should be seen as an opportunity, according to Paddy Stapleton, executive coach and facilitator (paddystapletoncoaching.com).

“So many people kind of crash into it,” said Stapleton. “Their focus is very much on where they are leaving and what they are leaving,” he said.

“My emphasis is very much focusing on the other side, where you are going rather than where you are leaving.



Declan Lawlor, consultant with the Retirement Planning Council



Paula Hanlon, life coach

“People need to prepare for it and, in fact, they need to become more proactive. It is the end of a key phase and the beginning of another phase. It is a significant opportunity to live your remainder of life's dreams.”

People generally underestimate the important role work plays in their lives. At a very basic level, we spend at least eight hours a day at work carrying out tasks and interacting with colleagues.

That work is also a source of self-worth and identity. When retirement approaches, the focus tends to be on the pension rather than the hours of free time that it opens up.

“The bigger change is around the social and psychological. The change that not having to work five days a week will bring and trying to get the focus on that issue which tends to be more esoteric,” said Declan Lawlor, consultant with the RPC.

“You can quote the numbers in terms of the finance side, but how do you explain to someone the psychological and other changes that retirement is going to bring? Getting that message across can

be difficult.

“They think, ‘Sure, I have loads of time, I can do all the things I always wanted to do,’ and then you ask them what is it that they always wanted to do and they don't know. Some people have it well organised with hobbies and activities, but others have nothing outside of work.”

Preparation is vital

Lack of preparation means that retirement can sneak up on you and put you in danger of drifting. This sudden injection of free time can become overwhelming and the retiree ends up doing nothing with it.

“Sometimes it is just this lack of awareness in that they suddenly start with a new chapter in their life and they haven't a clue how they are going to fill the time,” said life coach Paula Hanlon (paulahanlon.ie).

“A lot of people can go into it thinking, ‘Sure, I will be delighted when I retire,’ and it can come as a bit of a shock when, after a few weeks, suddenly the landscape is new and scary and they don't know what they are going to do.”

“It is about being prepared practically and emotionally for what might happen to you, and then it is about stepping outside your comfort zone and doing things that you thought you never could or would do to see how you get on.”

This is where planning becomes key. Falling into retirement is a bad idea. The advice is that you should start thinking about what you want to do at least a year before your retirement date.

You may want to consider attending a retirement planning course or meeting with a coach to discuss your options. Considering in advance the personal

challenges you are likely to face in retirement will have a major impact on the following years, according to Lawlor.

“Your income is going to be what it is and there is probably not an awful lot that you can do about it, but those other issues are within your control to some extent – you can manage them. You may not be able to do an awful lot to change the financial situation, but you can do an awful lot to change your attitude to retirement,” he said.

At the heart of this is acknowledging that you are moving on. You may even need to grieve a bit for the life you once had, particularly if your work was very important to you.

“If you think of someone who has a very successful career,” Hanlon said, “they are Mr or Mrs Important in work every day and their every word is being valued and sought out. Suddenly that is taken away from them and they think, ‘Oh my God, what do I have to offer anybody?’ There is a real sense of loss in some cases.”

Stapleton has been through this process himself, having retired from the ESB after more than 40 years. As his retirement approached, he sat down and wrote a “wheel of life” outlining all the areas of his life that he felt needed attention to create the ideal retirement scenario and to clarify his motivation.

One outcome was that, with some guidance from his wife who recognised that he would not enjoy being idle, he decided to continue doing paid work for two-and-a-half days a week, volunteering for another half day.

As well as executive coaching, he puts his own experience into practice

by providing retirement planning – including a Working Beyond Retirement programme in conjunction with the Harmonics Group. Retirement should not be equated with inactivity, he believes.

“One of the key shifts that people need to make is counterintuitive – they need to be more proactive. In the work environment you have a lot of structure around you,” he said.

“You have a job, it gives you identity and a purpose. You have your work community, and up to 80 per cent of people's friends can be around the work environment. There is also an element of new learning in the work environment.

“All of those kind of come as part of the territory and when you retire they are not automatically there, so, you need to become more proactive in terms of identifying the new opportunities, what kind of work you are going to do, be it voluntary or otherwise; and new learning.”

Hanlon said that getting people to start trying things out in advance of retirement helps make the transition easier.

“You work with them on that and get them to say what are the things they like doing – sometimes it is lack of confidence that they haven't tried things – and once they start dipping their toe in the water and trying different things and meeting different people, it kind of falls into shape for them,” she said.

Re-contracting

One area that absolutely should be broached before retirement begins is the impact that it is going to have on your home life. This is particularly applicable where one partner has been a home-maker. The office worker may

be retiring but the home-maker is not.

Stapleton advocates “re-contracting” with your partner in advance of retirement to set the boundaries for the relationship going forward.

“They are going to have twice the man or woman and half the money. There are issues around space. When I retired first I was in the kitchen that I, on my laptop and watching golf that I had recorded from the night before – but I was also in my wife's office. I am no longer there – a room was converted into an office.

“Have the conversation about the time you will spend together and the times that you will continue to be with your own friends and hobbies. It is so important that dependency doesn't slip in,” he said.

This will change in time, but at the moment there is still a significant cohort of couples where men were working outside the home while their wives looked after their domestic life.

For those men, retirement can be particularly difficult because their social outlet, purpose and self-worth was wrapped up in work.

“If you had a spouse at home, they had to develop other activities while you were out working five days a week,” said Stapleton.

“They got involved in other things and built up activities over the year. They have already built up a network of activities, contacts, friends, relationships.

“Now, suddenly the husband has dropped the major one that he was involved in, but the wife still has her activities so what is he going to do?”

“He cannot just tag along and say, ‘Well, sure, I will join you.’ It doesn't work like that.”

People Problems

The many ways of working

Flexible work patterns make for a varied career tapestry

From “always-on” to sabbaticals, employees have never had so much choice when it comes to working hours



Gerald Flynn

higher mortgages and rising household bills as well as expectations of regular foreign holidays and dining out.

Around the same time the option began to attract senior managers and organisation development specialists in that it overcame overtime spending and allowed businesses to provide more services to customers.

A by-product was supposed to be happier, less-pressured employees who enjoyed more control over their work processes and time.

In reality “flexibility” came to mean whatever the speaker's personal preferences or priorities happened to be. It ranged from part-time working, annualised hours or zero-hours contracts, to job-sharing, working from home or term-time working.

All arrangements have at-

tractions and pitfalls which need to be addressed in advance and, ideally, new working arrangements should be tried on a trial basis perhaps for a month or two before being confirmed.

We have seen a marked increase in part-time working over the past five years, but that is a result of higher unemployment and fewer employment options.

This is confirmed by the large proportion of part-time employees who have indicated that they would take on more work if it was available. The recent pick-up in employment has shown average part-time working hours are also rising.

Flexitime

Perhaps the most established aspect of flexibility in Irish workplaces is “flexitime” which can be easily managed and monitored with “clocking-in” software. It usually allows people to work fixed hours between “windows” so that someone could arrive between 8am and 10am and leave between 4pm and 6pm.”

All very well, but some people will try to use it as a means of working a four-day

week which may not be in the organisation's best interests.

The temptation may be understandable for those with high childcare costs, as an extra day at home could save up to €100 net for those with two young children.

Compressed hours

A variation on this is compressed hours which became quite common in the public service, especially with nurses willing to work long shifts to effectively have a three-day week – though that often incorporated a lot of weekend working.

At the other end of the spectrum are those workplaces where “we employ enthusiastic people who embrace high-performance and like to have fun at work”.

This may effectively be code for lower-paid, young workers who are afraid to go home and stay at work for up to 60 hours a week because there is a pool-table and video-screen in the lobby and free coffee dispensers on each floor.

Job-sharing

Job-sharing is another arrangement in some workplaces, but it demands very strong

communication and “handovers” to work smoothly. It also requires that managers know where projects are and do not have to wait days to find out the current position.

Working from home may seem like an ideal solution but generally it will work well only for those with specific, self-contained skills and is best suited to people who undertake projects or reports, rather than having to interact with colleagues on an hourly basis.

It can also lead to isolation, and those working from home for a medium-sized organisation would be well advised to spend at least one day on-site to liaise with colleagues and managers and ensure visibility.

They also need to watch out for envy where people suspect that they “have a jammy arrangement” or lack real commitment.

‘Always on’

It is easy to claim that technology and high-speed internet can enhance flexibility and looser working arrangements, but it is has to be well managed.

Some employees, especially in transnational firms, have

found that flexibility means “always-on” arrangements with an expectation that emails are responded to at 11pm or 7am to suit different time zones.

Often holidays do not exist in the world of corporate emails or LinkedIn requests and it takes direct management decisions to encourage “holiday close-downs” of emails.

Career breaks

Probably the very best form of flexibility is sabbatical leave or the career break, which operate in a few organisations outside academia.

This may allow for a three or six-month paid break every five years, either to study or work in a charity, so that the person can recharge batteries or enhance their skills.

For those on zero-hour contracts in retail outlets, another form of flexibility with little guarantee of earnings, these paid career breaks must seem like something from another planet.

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■ **Orla Flynn** is Cork Institute of Technology's new vice-president for external affairs. Flynn has been head of CIT's Faculty of Business and Humanities for the past year. Before that, she was head of CIT Crawford College of Art & Design for six years, having served as inaugural head of CIT's School of Humanities.



■ **Aidan O'Connell** is Trade Credit Brokers new director for Ireland and Britain. O'Connell is joining from O'Leary Insurances where he was business development manager for four years. Before that, he sales director with Trade Credit Brokers for six years.



■ **Alison Monaghan** is joining Smurfit Executive Development as programme manager. Monaghan has been MBA programmes administrator with UCD Smurfit School for the past two years. Before that, she was with Malone O'Regan for 11 years.

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