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CRAIG LAWRENCE: Rethinking what retirement really means

The rise of the 'grey zone' and multiple-job careers for the over-sixties

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Financial planning can't be a one-size-fits-all formula. (123RF/AndreyPopov)

The idea of “stopping at 62” is fast becoming outdated. Recent global data, including insights highlighted by the World Health Organisation, shows that most people can now expect to live well into their sixties and beyond.

By 2030, one in six people worldwide will be aged 60 or older, a figure expected to double by 2050.

At the same time, international studies, including those shared by the World Economic Forum, suggest that Gen Z workers may have multiple different jobs or careers over their lifetimes. That's a very different picture from the one our parents faced, and it raises two big questions: what does a multiple-job career mean for your retirement savings? And how long does your money now need to last?

A longer life, a longer plan

Research from the UCT Liberty Institute of Strategic Marketing's forerunners report (over-55s) shows that South Africans are living longer, staying economically active for longer, and redefining what it means to "retire". The report describes this shift as the emergence of a "Grey Zone" — the phase between earning and full retirement, where many people are experimenting with new ways of working, consulting or pursuing passion projects while still earning an income.

Recent behavioural research also shows that the decision to retire is not just financial — it's psychological. As the Harvard Business Review notes, people often resist retirement because it involves grappling with loss of identity, meaningful work and social connection. These factors help explain why so many choose to remain engaged long after the traditional retirement age.

This "bridge phase" is reshaping financial planning. The traditional three-stage life model — learn, earn, retire — is being replaced by a more fluid, multi-stage approach as people live longer and work differently.

Multiple jobs, multiple opportunities — or risks

If Gen Z are likely to have multiple jobs, that means multiple transitions — and potentially multiple retirement funds. Each career move offers a chance to preserve and grow long-term savings, yet too often those opportunities are lost when people withdraw their savings instead of transferring them.

This is one of the biggest threats to long-term wellbeing. Each time someone cashes out savings to cover short-term needs, they forfeit decades of compound growth.

Consider a 28-year-old with R50,000 in a retirement fund. It might be tempting to take the cash, as the tax payable seems small (about R4,000). However, if those funds were invested and grew at 8% a year until age 65, the amount would reach about R860,000 — 17 times the original value that would be lost if withdrawn too soon.

It's easy to see why this happens. For younger workers, retirement feels abstract — something to think about "one day". But "one day" arrives faster than expected, and early withdrawals can have lasting effects.

From retirement date to life design

The Forerunners Report finds that many South Africans over 55 want to remain active — not only for financial reasons but because they value purpose, connection and identity through work. Retirement today is less about stopping and more about shifting gears.

For some, that means semiretirement — consulting, mentoring or running small businesses. For others, it's volunteer work or finally pursuing long-delayed passions. Retirement has become personal; there's no single definition that fits everyone.

Planning for flexibility

Financial planning can't be a one-size-fits-all formula. The role of a financial guide is to help people make sense of their options, manage transitions and ensure money supports the life they want, not the other way around.

If you expect to have multiple career changes, that's multiple points in your life worth revisiting your plan, checking your preservation options and making sure your savings continue to work for you.

In a world of portfolio careers and flexible employment, the need for guidance has never been greater. Financial planning is about strategy, accountability and making sure your long-term security stays on track through every career change.

A coach for your financial life

I often compare financial planning to professional sport. Even the best athletes — think Rafa Nadal at the peak of his career — still had a coach. Not because the coach could hit a better forehand, but because they offered perspective, strategy and discipline to stay focused on what mattered most.

In the same way, a financial planner acts as a coach and accountability partner — helping you understand your strengths, align your values with your financial choices, and adjust your plan as your life evolves.

Just as your health needs regular exercise to support longevity, your money needs ongoing attention and care to support a longer life.

The takeaway

Retirement as we once knew it is being rewritten. The “grey zone” between work and full retirement is expanding, lifespans are extending, and younger generations will experience more transitions than ever before.

Multiple careers mean multiple chances to protect and grow your financial future. Whether you're 25 or 55, each is an opportunity to pause, seek guidance, and make choices that align your money with your life's goals.

Many people still believe that only the wealthy need a financial planner, but the truth is everyone can benefit from having a financial guide. Whether you're just starting out, changing jobs or preparing for retirement, good financial guidance helps you make the most of every opportunity — designing a future that works for the life you want to live.

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