

# Turning 60 but still working? How to encourage China's retirees back to work

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China's recent initiative to launch a HR website for elderly people marks "the first step in building an information service platform for the country's older citizens," Xinhua News Agency reported.

By helping older people with employment, the website is of great significance in tackling the challenges of an aging population, according to an official.

But elderly people seem to have different opinions about whatever residual value could still be extracted from them.

Jacob von Bisterfeld, an expat who is long retired but still actively involved in all and sundry social and business engagements in China, is effusive about the new development.

"After the euphoria upon retirement of not having to go to work and going fishing or reading or talking has worn off — a period that usually lasts from a few months to up to half a year — a realization tends to sink in that the individual is no longer the respected manager, teacher, journalist or valuable colleague but just a retiree, an old man or woman," he said.

"As time goes by and bereavements of friends and family are thinning communication channels, loneliness tends to set in... a cycle of monotony that many geriatrics would LOVE to break, or reduce by part-time or full-time employment," he said in a WeChat message in response to my inquiry.

While this ennui could also

be observed among some newly retired Chinese, a closer scrutiny would suggest a more varied picture.

Xu Daofang, a former journalist, has never taken up any employment since his retirement six years ago. Although he has no grandchildren so far, he has spent a considerable portion of his time seeking treatment for a chronic injury to his waist.

Xu said that for some professionals, such as physicians, lawyers, academics, engineers, or artists, finding some forms of useful employment has never been a problem — some of them make even more money than in their previously formal employment.

Nor are people employed as civil servants in need of many blandishments to continue to serve in their former capacity, even though the civil service pension is often good enough to support old age in ease and comfort. Clearly the jobs being created for the elderly are of a different kind.

The aforementioned platform lists a total of 81 vacancies, all in Beijing, ranging in roles from the head, sales staff and customer service workers for elderly care institutions, and paramedics or nurses, with compensation ranging from 3,000 to 30,000 yuan (US\$441-4,410) a month.

It could be safely concluded that the services most needed would be of manual labor in nature and indifferently compensated. This would possibly dispel doubts entertained by those arguing that creating more jobs for the elderly would make it more difficult

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An expat retiree

for young people to get work.

One McDonald's outlet in Beijing is seeking certified pensioners aged over 50 for females and aged over 60 for males. They would work four or five days a week, and four to eight hours a day, earning 1,800 to 3,500 yuan a month.

One comment in reaction to this information is illuminating: "I don't think a certified pensioner would be interested in such jobs, and uncertified pensioners, who would probably be interested, won't qualify."

But for those who qualify and are physically strong enough to meet the challenges



of these jobs, they have a potential new way to subsidize their family income.

Complications remain.

Xu observed that while elderly workers are cheap, they are also "consumables," in that while the employer could save a lot in employment benefits in the case of a pensioner, elderly labor is more prone to accidents or emergency health conditions. So it is probably necessary to seek legal clarifications about employer obligations and liabilities in case of workplace accidents.

But putting more elderly people back to work will probably become a long-term trend eventually.

According to official statistics, Chinese people aged 60 and above amounted to 267 million, or 18.9 percent of the total population, by the end of 2021. Significantly, about half of these elderly people are aged 60 to 69, a considerable portion of whom could be interested and competent to go back to work.

The overall situation could be explained in terms of China's birth boom during the years from 1962 to 1975, with average annual births of 20 million people in this period, and a record 30 million in 1963. Interestingly, many people born in 1963 would

retire next year.

Currently, the retirement age in general is 60 for males, 55 for female cadres, and 50 for female employees.

The picture is more complicated given the lack of a strict pension system for the nearly 500 million rural population.

Thus for a typical rural citizen, he/she would work as long as their health permits, in the farm fields, at odd jobs or, like most of their urban counterparts, taking care of their grandchildren.

Bringing up grandchildren is a demanding yet often unshirkable job for most Chinese grandparents, probably more so for those in big cities, where children need close attention in terms of daily care, pre-school enrichment, and all kinds of subject cramming.

These unpaid jobs are so demanding that some people complain they would rather go back to work, though from a social perspective, the grandparents are certainly making a significant contribution to society in general by helping bring up the younger generation. Predictably, this children-rearing engagement would be more important in the years to come as families embark on having more than one child.