RETIREMENT

O.K., Now What?
A key question for retirees is whether to stick with familiar activities or try something new. There are many answers.

By COELI CARR

MECHANICAL ENGINEER Joe Szuba of Dearborn, Mich., was elated when his early-retirement package came through. A 35-year veteran of the Ford Motor Co. who supervised a rapid-tooling project at the company’s scientific-research laboratory, he cleared out his desk on a Friday afternoon. Two days later he was at his new job—as a consultant for Koppy Corp., an automotive-equipment firm he had worked with during his Ford years to help carry out a previously shelved Ford project. “It made sense to me’ he says. Since “retiring” Szuba, now 61, has incorporated his own consulting company, gained two other clients and filed for five new patents. “A retiree can’t afford to think like a retiree:’ he says. Well, that’s one theory. Another is that a retiree should capitalize on retirement’s freedom by taking a flyer on something that might never have been possible during the pursuit of a career. New Yorker Judy Rosenblum tried that path. After retiring at 55 from teaching elementary school in Cedarhurst, N.Y., she decided to go to art school, “It was an unknown for me” she says. “1 never in my life thought I could paint. It was like magic’ She found that she could exhibit and sell her paintings. Buoyed by this success, she took courses to learn how to play bridge. Then, building on her teaching expertise, she enrolled in a class on how to teach the game, which she now does during her winters in Florida and aboard cruise ships that have taken her and her husband to Hawaii, Europe and the Caribbean. Says Rosenblum, 72, “Don’t ever be afraid to try something new, because you never can tell where it’s going to lead you:”

Szuba and Rosenblum illustrate two answers to a crucial question about retirement: Should you spend your golden years doing what you have always done or maybe take one last shot at turning a longtime dream into reality? Which way you answer the question is less important than the fact that you ask it, say Jeri Sedlar and Rick Miners, authors of Don’t Retire, Rewire! (Alpha Books). When the pair, who previously owned a York City—based executive-search and transition-coaching firm, asked pre-retirees about their vision for the future, the responses ranged from “none” and “none, but it’ll evolve” to vague statements like “reading” or “playing with my grandchildren:’ To the basic question “Do you have a plan?” most respondents said no.

Before current or future retirees can formulate an agenda, they need to figure out what gives them satisfaction and pleasure in the first place, say Sedlar and Miners. The authors explain that knowing your “drivers” — they identify 30 of them, such as the need to be creative, powerful or part of the action — helps you select activities that best align with your needs. Sedlar encourages people to give themselves directives such as “I owe
it to myself to know, and finally have the guts to say, that a certain driver is important to me” and “If I’ve had power and been a leader and I like it, dammit, that’s not going to go away:’

Szuba, who sought business advice from trusted colleagues as his retirement day drew closer, had no trouble deciding what was important to him. By coupling the familiar discipline of his lifelong profession with the novelty of owning his own company, he satisfied his desire for old comforts and new challenges. “I get out every day and take my friends to lunch and go see them at Ford,” he says. “Success breeds good feelings in a person.’

But the ease, confidence and efficiency with which Szuba plunged into his new life is hardly the norm, according to Sedlar and Miners. Even if people know their drivers and trust what their gut tells them to pursue, they’re often concerned about other people’s reactions. Sedlar describes an attorney, in practice for 30 years, who is gung ho on fly-fishing and, at 62, would like to commercially sell the rods he makes. “But how does he justify, in his head, ‘I’m a highly successful lawyer, I’ve got all this recognition; what will people say?’’ she says. “Somewhere along the way, this big old thing called the ego might get in the way and keep you from doing things that you love:’

It’s more often a problem for men than for women. David H. Rosen, a psychiatrist and Jungian analyst who teaches at Texas A&M University at College Station, says men often feel lost when their sense of self-worth is overly identified with work. Rosen, who wrote Transforming Depression: Healing the Soul Through Creativity (Nicolas-Hays), cites the movie About Schmidt, in which Jack Nicholson’s title character, a retired insurance actuary, is saved from aimlessness and depression by his connection through a charity to a child in Africa. “That little thread of contact with a child outside was also Schmidt’s child inside:’ says Rosen. When it comes to exploring, through therapy, what that inner voice might be saying, however, many men consider such an approach “unmanly:’ Rosen says.

Miners has also observed the degree to which many men, primarily white collar, are tied to their work. “They say it’s my identity, it’s my place in the sun, I am my business card -- that kind of thing’ says Miners. Typically, when such men retire, they get restless after a short period, then try to find the same kind of work in which they once excelled—which isn’t always easy.

Mike Cianciarulo, president and chief executive of Earth Fare, a six-store natural-supermarket chain with headquarters in Asheville, NC., also he knows firsthand what can happen when retirees have no game plan. Many seniors seek part-time employment at Earth Fare not because of the discounts on meals and purchases but because they’re bored. “For the most part, when they stay home, they sit there waiting for an illness’ says Cianciarulo.

Anne Alexander Vincent, a psychological-development consultant and life coach with a practice in Nashville, Tenn., has noticed an increase in the number of pre retiree and retiree clients seeking help in defining an activities agenda. “I think people are so ready for something new:’ she says. “If they thought they had to do another five or 10 years of what they had done, they simply don’t have the energy for it” Once clients
embrace the possibility of doing something new, she relies on assessment tools, including standard psychological tests, to help clarify what they are most likely to enjoy and therefore pursue as part of a second career or avocation.

Such departures, however, can be fraught with difficulties, points out Paul D. Tieger, president of the consulting firm PersonalityType.com and co-author of Do What You Are: Discover the Perfect Career for You Through the Secrets of Personality Type (Little, Brown). “Most people, especially when they’re older, are not comfortable starting something brand new” Tieger says. “The learning curve is too steep, they’re not as facile mentally, and they’re more comfortable where they have competencies and where they’ve had success.” Economic considerations are also a strong factor. “These days, unless you’re really secure, you don’t leave something at 55 to do something different.”

A lucky few are able to continue working to an advanced age while freshening their agenda with other activities—thus combining the satisfaction of a career with many of the pleasures of retirement. Martin Whitman, 78, still puts in a full schedule as co-chief investment officer at Third Avenue Management LLC in New York City. He also teaches a course on value investing to graduate students at the Yale School of Management, plays tennis and, with his wife—who, at 76, works as director of the children’s-rights division of Human Rights Watch—dotes on their five grandchildren. Whitman’s advice: “Have some outside interests.”

One retiree who has adjusted to a surprisingly different direction while resolving the issues of ego and overidentification with his previous career is John Platt of Hilton Head, S.C. Platt was a surgeon in Tennessee for nearly 40 years and then an outpatient physician at a veterans’ hospital on Parris Island, N.C., for an additional 10. Now at 85, he works four days a week in the garden shop of the Hilton Head Wal-Mart, operating a forklift and keeping computerized accounts of stock. Always a plant lover, he shrugs off the unlikeliness of the job. “I didn’t compare it to what I had done in my professional life,” he says. Platt enjoys the perks: he and his wife Mary, 76, have just planted a good selection of bougainvillea, hibiscus and gardenias at home. “I knew I’d enjoy being with the people who worked there” says “Doctor John,” as his colleagues call him. A friend who already worked in the garden shop suggested he join the team, he explains, and “I was on the lookout for something. It’s been one step at a time for me.”

Whatever direction they are headed in, retirees are well advised to take that first step sooner rather than later.

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