

# Here's How Boomer Women Are Thriving in Retirement

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- By [Kerry Hannon](#) Entrepreneurship Expert November 16, 2017

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Should I stay or should I go? It's a conundrum for many boomer women. You've spent your adult life building a long and fulfilling career, but the time gradually arrives when your friends start retiring and your financial planner begins that probing discussion about how you visualize your lifestyle in your 60s, 70s and beyond.

To plenty of female boomer professionals — who spent their careers breaking through barriers to achieve success and independence — retirement is practically an anathema.

## 'Thriving in Retirement'

And these are the women featured in the fine new book, [Thriving in Retirement: Lessons from Baby Boomer Women](#). Authors Anne C. Coon and Judith Ann Feuerherm talked intensively with 25 professional women, age 61 to 71, who were nearing retirement or recently retired. The women — dubbed by the authors Cohort 25 — were selected because they're part of the leading edge of a generation of gender-busting career women. (Full disclosure: the authors asked me to review their book for an endorsement, which I provided.)

Coon and Feuerherm chose to look exclusively at career women who were, they wrote, "committed to long term

progression engagement and growth in their fields.” Their average number of years of professional employment: roughly 36. The Cohort 25 answered the authors’ surveys and participated in one-on-one interviews as well as group sessions with the other participants. The authors conducted follow-up interviews a year later.

I recently interviewed Coon and Feuerherm about the book (highlights are below), and asked why they wanted to learn how boomer women are reshaping their identities and focus in retirement.

“I had recently retired and began to realize that I was facing one of my most difficult transitions,” Feuerherm explained. “I wanted to sort it out and think about what it meant and wondered who else was going through or anticipating this difficult phase.”

Coon was curious about the role of storytelling in understanding moving from one life stage to another. “As a baby boomer now making my transition from full-time teaching and administration to focus on writing, I am learning how stories give us an invaluable way of understanding our experience and passion on what we have learned,” she said.

## **Reflecting on Lives and Careers**

The authors weren’t looking for answers, necessarily. Instead, they wanted “to provide opportunities for women to talk to one another, to reflect on their lives and careers,” they wrote.

While conducting the interviews, they discovered the 25 women took on retirement with the same resourcefulness, confidence and zeal they did with their careers. But some struggled with finding a new identity in retirement after hanging up their high-status, professional cloaks.

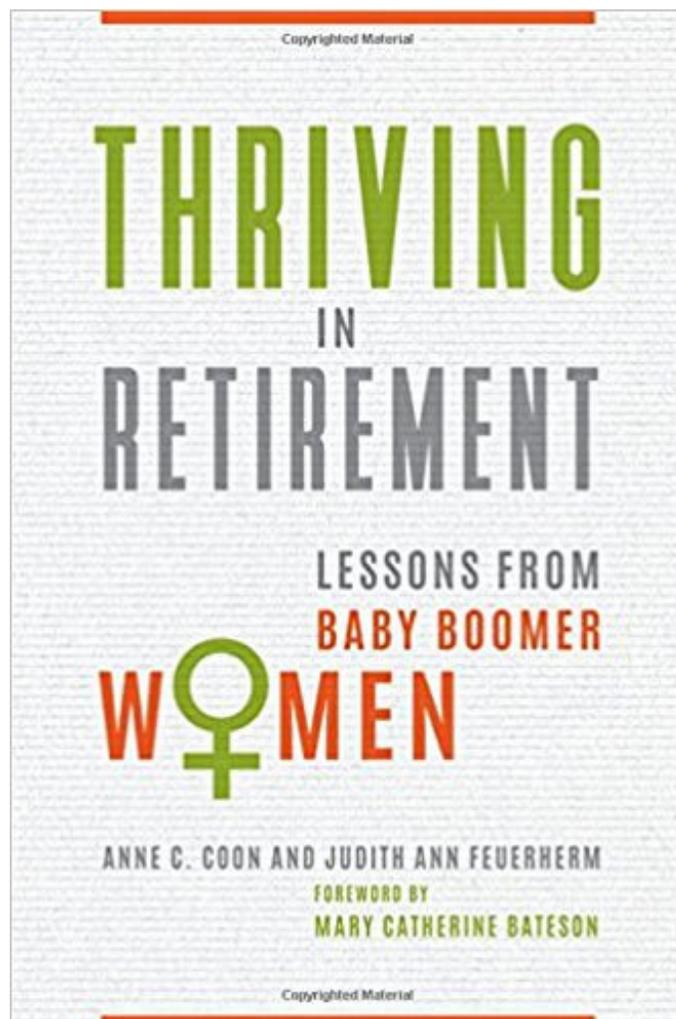
Some chose to retire due to changes in their profession and in the nature of the work, such as dwindling opportunities for them. Others saw colleagues retiring, or needed to devote more time caring for a spouse or for aging parents. It was important, they felt, to maintain a vibrant social network and spend time with younger people in retirement.

## Testing Out New Ideas in Retirement

Many were thinking of, or already returning to, past interests or developing creative talents they'd set aside. Some were testing out new ideas for putting their professional expertise to work in the service of nonprofit or volunteer endeavors.

About 40 percent of the women said working part-time in retirement was either somewhat or very important — often for psychological reasons more than financial. But, the authors wrote, some found that “going after a second career or dream job, even a part-time one, could be tough.” One woman left a high-profile career with an international agency to follow her passion for art and took flower-arranging classes. She approached several florist shops looking for part-time work and was turned down repeatedly due to a lack of experience.

Coon and Feuerherm are also boomer women who've had impressive careers. Coon, a professor emerita at Rochester Institute of Technology, in Rochester, N.Y. served the faculty there for 28 years, retiring as a professor of English and senior associate dean in the College of Liberal Arts. Feuerherm is a Rochester, N.Y. career coach specializing in the 50+ market and previously led a team of coaching consultants for [Right Management](#), a global career management firm.



## What the 'Thriving in Retirement' Authors Learned

Highlights from my interview with them:

**Next Avenue: The book is only about professional women. How do you think the responses would have been different for boomer women who had non-professional jobs and why?**

**Anne C. Coon:** Certainly, they would share the loss of identity and loss of routine when they step out of their work. They would share the loss of workplace friendships. These are the things that would come with retirement just as surely for them as the women we studied. But they probably would not have not experienced questions of who they are going to be or dealt with the loss of titles in the same way.

**Your sample was small. Is it fair to extrapolate from them lessons for other women about thriving in retirement?**

**Coon:** We were not looking to represent all baby boomer women or all professional ones. What we did is try to make it as diverse and representative of baby boomer professionals, a group in which their peers can see themselves.

**Almost a third of the women in your cohort were still working full-time. Is that really retirement?**

**Judith Ann Feuerherm:** The book is about process. The women were not necessarily ready to retire. It was about discussing what it would look like when they left their full-time jobs and paychecks. It was exploring how they saw themselves: 'What will it be like?' 'I don't know what I want to do.'

**Coon:** Yes, some were still working when we first contacted them, and when we returned a year later, they had, in fact, made the decision to retire. They were having questions about the transition to retirement. Some were talking and watching their friends, who had already retired, wondering: 'How did they get through this?'

**What changed between the time you first surveyed the women and when you went back a year later?**

**Feuerherm:** When we checked in a year later, every single woman was in a very positive and moving forward period. The opportunity of talking about aging, the loss of identity and power with the group helped them realize they weren't alone.

**Coon:** They found a way to reshape their identity; some called it 'changing their online profile.' In reality, it was looking at who they were, pulling back the pieces that had been important and finding ways to hang on to them.

Interestingly, many changed their physical space. They had moved. They had remodeled their homes or reconfigured their studios or their offices. It was part of a whole reconstruction of who they were.

**You say these women weren't just moving into retirement. They were taking it on. What do you mean?**

**Feuerherm:** They never saw themselves as retiring. It was a word they hated. They thought it made them invisible. They didn't like it. They saw themselves as shifting gears.

**Coon:** They were curating. How would they use their resources and their time? Where would they put what they had — their expertise? They did not just turn the page and move into a different chapter, an old metaphor for retiring. They were actively involved in choosing the options that they had.

That may not have been when we first met them, but when we returned in a year they were there. Initially, many had taken on many board and volunteer opportunities. They stepped back and said: 'I don't need to do that. I need to choose where I am going to put my energy. I need to connect who I am and what is important to me.' They took charge of themselves.

**What are some of the lessons other boomer women and Gen X women who haven't yet retired can learn from these women?**

**Feuerherm:** Be reflective, share your fears, tell your stories.

**Coon:** Our identities are always evolving — throughout and after our full-time careers. Throughout a career, you develop an agility by which you land on your feet. You learn flexibility and resilience. The things we learn and master as professionals really become part of who we are. That was really an eye opener for me. We don't leave all that behind. We repurpose the things we have learned in other ways in retirement.



Credit: John Retallack

Anne C Coon, author



Judith Ann Feuerherm, author

## How are professional boomer women transforming retirement the way they transformed the workforce during their careers?

**Feuerherm:** They have no reservation about entering this phase in the same way they had when they entered their careers. It's a phase they are excited and energized by.

**Coon:** When they entered the workforce, they changed what women were thought of and capable of. Again, they are changing the expectations about what opportunities they have. It *is* similar to the paradigm of how they changed the workplace.

## Some of the women said they were afraid of slipping into the traditional roles of their mothers and grandmothers during retirement. Can you talk about that?

**Feuerherm** I think it is more about other people's expectations mixed with their desire to care for people they love. They are defining a balance of who they are and how much they can and cannot give at this stage in their lives.

## The women said they couldn't find role models for making the transition into retirement. What did you make of that?

**Coon:** They made it absolutely clear we don't need role models. We *are* the role models. The absence of role models was not a negative. At so many other points in their career, it was up to them. They still have the sense that we're going to figure this out.

## How are boomer women staying vital and focused in retirement?

**Coon:** They are doing it by doing what they enjoyed most during best part of their career. That consistently fell into three categories: Being creative, being engaged with others and being valued and seen as vital, with their contributions being recognized. The challenge is repurposing skills to take on a new project, part-time employment, volunteering for a nonprofit, mentoring or serving on a board.

By [Kerry Hannon](#)

Kerry Hannon has covered personal finance, retirement and careers for The New York Times, Forbes, Money, U.S. News & World Report and USA Today, among other publications. She is the author of a dozen books including [Money Confidence: Really Smart Financial Moves for Newly Single Women](#), [Great Jobs for Everyone 50+: Finding Work That Keeps You Happy and Healthy...and Pays the Bills](#), [Getting the Job You Want After 50](#), [Love Your Job: The New Rules for Career Happiness](#) and [What's Next? Finding Your Passion and Your Dream Job in Your Forties, Fifties and Beyond](#). Her website is [kerryhannon.com](http://kerryhannon.com). Follow her on Twitter [@kerryhannon](#).



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