

Coming of age?



Here's a short questionnaire for you: What's your age? When did you start working? Or, if you have retired, when did you retire? Or, if you are still studying, by what age do you plan to start working? And, when do you plan to retire?

Most probably, you would have started working by 22 or 23 and would have retired by 60 or 65. But there are a few who would have retired at 70 or 75 and even those who would have retired at 50. Similarly, there are many who have walked into their first workspace somewhere around 40 or 50.

What's the deal?

When it comes to work, unlike general opinion, there is no defined 'working age'. While convention states that the spectrum should span from 25 to 65, the changing times today call for widening that particular range. In India, each and every person is subjected to a gruelling 13-14-year education that aims to make them ready to join the workforce of the country. While a majority of us follow this course to the T, there are many who seek to chart their own course. For instance, 89-year-old Latika Chakravorty started an online business venture to sell her handmade potli bags. Today, she's even getting orders from New Zealand and Germany! Colonel Sanders established the popular food chain of KFC at the age of 62. On the other hand, today, the youngest entrepreneurs in India are Sanjay and Shravan Kumaran, two boys who founded 'Go Dimensions' in 2011 at the age of 12 and 14 years old. Clearly, age is just a number for many.

What exactly does 'working age' mean? According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the 'working age' population is defined as those aged 15 to 64. Now this range has been defined keeping in mind the physical and mental abilities of an average human being, which are the strongest during this time. Since the start of the civilisation, work has been defined by one task or another. From hunting to farming to foraging to agriculture to textiles to industry to construction to white-collar jobs, our workability has evolved tremendously. Today, fortunately, a majority of us enjoy white-collar jobs with a stable income and lifestyle. And it is this stability that motivates many to take risks when it comes to

their profession. Be it retiring early or starting up a whole new venture after 50, Indian workers are now more flexible and accommodating when it comes to working.

Kewal Kapoor, director & creative strategist, Chai Kreative and Return of Million Smiles, offers his view on 'working age', "Firstly, we need to define what we mean by 'working age'. Ideally, it should be the age till which a person believes they can work and is capable of delivering results. Having a fixed cap on retirement age makes very little sense as a lot of people continue to be active and sharp well into their old age. It also affects public perception and leads to unfounded age-based discrimination." Dr Vinod Kumar, psychiatrist and head, Mpower, The Centre, Bengaluru, adds, "Yes, 'working age' does exist but only in the traditional sense, wherein there is an established pattern of learning/training and then embarking on working life. In the Indian context, there are well-defined stages of life which include stages for fulfilling one's worldly obligations before embarking on a more spiritual path. In the western context, there are very well-defined stages of life, including working age and defined age for retirement, for practical, financial and legal purposes."

There are various studies that project the idea that one's success is tied to one's age. Years ago, a popular study revealed the age at which different artistes did their greatest work. They compared the best performances of achievers in different fields and came to the average age when everyone peaked for every field. It was suggested that while athletes did their greatest work at 24, innovators were at their peak at 37. Artists peaked at 49 while architects blossomed at 56. When you delve even deeper, there are more revelations related to age. According to science, the peak of life satisfaction comes at 23, while your arithmetic skills peak at 50. Do you know what's scary? The peak of your psychological well-being can only happen at 82!

However, over the years, many have disproved these statistics and asserted that age is no obstacle when it comes to work or success. Malavika Kapur, 78, visiting professor, National Institute of Advanced Studies, IISc, formerly head of the department of clinical psychology, NIMHANS, narrates her story, "I retired from NIMHANS at 62. Currently, I am a visiting professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, and I am working a lot more than before my retirement. I am constantly on the go, I travel, read and write. Since I am a child psychologist, I work a lot with children. I am totally busy and very happy. My greatest wish is that I keep this pace up till I drop dead one day."

Revealing the reasons behind her relentless desire to keep working, Malavika says, "We can keep working for as long as our physical and mental abilities allow us to. Also, having a good role model helps. My father, K Shivaram Karanth, was a Jnanapeeth-award-winner who lived up to the age of 96. A day before he died, he was busy writing and giving interviews." Dr Vinod believes things are changing today. "In the current modern context, the boundaries between the different stages of one's life have increasingly blurred in the last few decades. This is due to various influences, including the ever-changing dynamic nature of 'work' in our society, increasing longevity due to greater access to high-quality healthcare, the information revolution brought on by the internet, etc. One has to be dynamic and responsive to changing circumstances if one has to remain healthy and relevant."

Change at a bigger level

Clearly, things are changing, which calls for policy changes, too. Kewal agrees, "The world's older population continues to grow at a steady rate, and is only set to increase in the coming years.

Governments across the world have started recognising it and started to relax the cap on retirement age and pass legislations to outlaw age-based discrimination.” Malavika adds, “Every individual is unique when it comes to his/her work preferences. But I feel if you really enjoy what you do, it never feels like work. The generic rule that everyone should retire by 56 or 62 doesn’t make sense. Also, one has to understand that giving up work doesn’t have to be the end of the world. You can still continue to keep yourself active mentally and physically.”

It’s high time the age-old conventions of working age change so as to incorporate everyone. Why should a person’s contribution be defined by rules that no longer serve anyone? Sure, laborious work demands someone younger but there’s no match for experience either. Every age group brings with it its own unique set of qualities. An inclusive workplace is better poised to contribute to society than a non-inclusive one. Young minds, when matched with middle-aged stability and old-age experience, can open up the frontiers of success for everyone.

Kewal asserts, “I believe that people should be allowed to work as long as they can do justice to the job. It will create a more inclusive work culture and will pave the way to a truly equitable society. Telling perfectly fit people that they are not right for the job will definitely curb their enthusiasm and dampen their desire to learn new things, adversely impacting their mental health in the long run.”

Psychologically speaking

This leads one to ask where psychological well-being fits into this whole working age saga? Dr Vinod asserts, “When we approach the working age issue rigidly, without taking into account individual circumstances, then we are asking for trouble. In the Indian setting, generally, work becomes the most important aspect of an adult’s life. Very few develop hobbies/interests outside of work. Suddenly when they find themselves ‘retired’, they find it extremely hard to cope with the loss of status/role, etc.” He further adds, “Over the years, I have come across many individuals who suffer from various mental health issues ranging from mild adjustment disorders to severe depression with psychotic symptoms. The peri-retirement age is a very difficult time when one is solely reliant on work for their identity and defining their sense of self.” Young or old, a person’s working age should solely be decided on the basis of his/her physical and mental abilities, and his ability to deliver the desired results. After all, age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don’t mind, it doesn’t matter.