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The Five Benefits of Work

It's hard to imagine that work has one benefit, let alone five! Yet, the truth is, work plays an enormously important role in our lives. This role is so important that without it, for some, life becomes meaningless and without identity.

A very sad case in point is the retirement of George Eastman, of Eastman/Kodak fame. Two months after he retired, he took his own life. His suicide note read, "My life is over, why wait?" This does not need to happen to you or to anyone.

A retirement that brings enrichment, personal fulfillment and renewal is possible. However, it won't happen automatically, you need to plan for it.

Work provides five benefits that have in our society evolved into needs. If these needs are not fulfilled in retirement, it will certainly take a toll on your happiness and eventually your health. These benefits are so integral to work that they have become transparent. It's like asking a fish about water.

The most obvious benefit of work is **money, income, a steady paycheck**. Mary Kay Ash, founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics, speaking of the needs of women, said:

Between birth and 20, what a woman needs is good parents.
Between 20 and 40, she needs good looks. Between 40 and 60,
she needs personality. And after age 60, what woman needs
is *cash*.

Work provides not only an income, but can also in some way provide a means of forced savings. At its most basic, tax withholdings provide the opportunity for a refund, and that can be used as a form of forced savings.

Optimally, though, work would provide pensions and other savings instruments. How you use and take advantage of them is up to you.

The second benefit of work is **time management**. It's easy to know when to get up in the morning if you have to be at the office by 8. You know where you'll be at 3 in the afternoon because it's written in your appointment book or is scheduled for you by your employer.

Think about it, it's been this way your whole life. Starting with pre-school or kindergarten, you've known what time to get up, when you needed to be somewhere and what you will be doing during the day. The only respite was summer break or holidays, but the routine wasn't gone, it was merely postponed. In retirement, it's *gone*.

In retirement, no one tells you what time to get up in the morning. You wake up "natural," with no alarm ringing. Sounds wonderful, doesn't it? And it is, for the first week or so. What feels un-natural is not knowing where you're "supposed" to be. In retirement, you need to re-think how you structure your day and create a life that supports who you are.

Another benefit is **utility**. By this, we mean a sense of utility, or purpose. In my work with career changers, the number one reason they want to change careers is that the work they are currently doing does not give them a feeling of contribution. It has no meaning.

The lack of your job, mundane as it was, leaves a huge void. It raises the entire question of whether we were essential in the first place. How important could we have been in the first place if they get along fine without us? What do I do now?

In retirement, you need to have a reason to exist, a purpose greater than yourself. You need to have a sense of contribution, or like George Eastman, you translate the void to yourself. There is no need for you in the world, so why be in it?

It doesn't have to be this depressing. The more thought you give to what brings fire into your eyes and passion in your heart before you retire, the

more likely you will be drawn to a life of contribution and meaning; one that you create for yourself.

The fourth benefit is a little more subtle but incredibly important: it is **status**. By this, we don't mean hierarchal status as in "I'm the boss, you're the worker bee." Rather it means you know where you stand in life.

If I say I am a hairdresser, you can place me in the proper role. The same is true with salesman, or bank president, or politician. You have a definite place in the world, you know what it is and so does everyone else. You are recognizable because of your role, your status in the workplace.

From our status through work, we derive our personal worth and identity, and when our work is gone, who we are is thrown into question.

Your job in retirement is to create a life that reflects who you are from the inside, and to quote Sam Keen "to find the grain in your own wood." Now that you do not have the veneer of your status, who are you really? The time to begin to answer that question is now.

The final benefit of work is **socialization**. Work provides a social group, whether you would choose them or not, that fills every working day. Some workplaces are so tight it is like a surrogate family. Leaving a workplace like that is like leaving your grandmother and moving to Siberia. It's a sudden, painful loss.

Think about whom you hang out with. Who do you go to lunch with? Create ways to maintain the friendships that are genuine in a way that does not involve the workplace. Start doing that before you retire. Create routines with your friends that will continue as life changes and moves on.

The exciting thing about retirement is that no one has ever done **YOUR** retirement before. You get to make it up as you go.

There is no one else like you on the planet. How will you create a life of meaning and fulfillment? How will you design your time and relationships to support who you really are? The time to answer those questions is **NOW!**