

## There is no place for graduation and retirement in a world of lifelong learning

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The words a society uses to talk about work and workers provide insight into its economic structure and cultural beliefs. Terms such as serfs, gentry, or proletariats reflect certain kinds of working relationships that existed at a given place at a given time. These words were commonly used in the past. But using them now sounds both antiquated and even offensive. Words used to talk about work also shape how we think about people. “Gig work” or “temp position” might describe the same job but give a different emotional feeling about its worth. Words used to describe work can also reinforce inequitable and false assumptions about the value of different kinds of people. It was not long ago that people said things like “this is women’s work” or “that’s a man’s job” as though they were simply stating objective realities. Now we recoil at such phrases since we know they reinforce unhealthy gender stereotypes.

While participating in a recent [Hacking HR](#) event, comments made by fellow panelists made me wonder if it is time to relegate two more work-related terms to the trash heap of history. These words are “graduation” and “retirement”. These words reflect a way of thinking about careers and people that is misaligned with a digitalized economy that requires continuous lifelong learning. They promote a way of thinking that suggests work and learning are mutually exclusive. And imply that some people are not old enough to add value while others are too old to be useful.

### ***Graduation and retirement did not always exist***

The concepts of graduation and retirement as they are used today are rooted in social and political changes that took shape in the 1800s. First, the industrial revolution created a demand for more skilled labor which led to a rise in standardized education. From a cynical viewpoint, the purpose of this education was not to better the lives of people. It was to graduate skilled workers to staff factories. Second, in the late 1800s retirement became a method that [encouraged older workers to leave the workforce just because they were old](#). Prior to around 1870, retirement pensions were mainly awarded based on the ability to work. Workers did not retire because they were old, they retired because they were no longer able to be productive. It was not until after 1870 that retirement started to be something people did primarily because they reached a certain age such as 65.

The previous paragraph is a vast oversimplification of a [complex series of changes](#). Nevertheless, our modern labor market is structured with the mindset that people go to school to learn for about the first 25 years of our lives. We then graduate and work until we retire about 40 years later. This model implies several damaging assumptions that do not make sense in a rapidly changing, digitalized economy that depends on a workforce committed to lifelong learning:

- **False assumption #1. Learning and working are separate activities.** The concept of “graduation” implies a demarcation between being a student and being an employee. This demarcation may have made sense when educational resources such as books and teachers were limited to schools, jobs involved repetitive tasks that did not require constantly learning new things, and work required being located in specific geographic locations. In the digitalized world, educational resources can be accessed anywhere at any time, jobs constantly change and require constant learning, and many jobs can be performed remotely. Every employee can be a student and every student can be an employee. People do not have to choose between learning and working. They can do both.

- **False assumption #2. People are not ready to work until they graduate.** There is an implied assumption that students are not qualified to be employees until they achieve some formal certification associated with graduation. There is certainly value in certifying people have mastered job relevant skills before being allowed to perform different roles. But students do not need to formally graduate from a school to effectively use their skills. In fact, students may be more motivated to learn skills when they can apply them to solve “real world” issues. I am not saying we should abolish diplomas or formal education. Just that students should not be expected or encourage to wait to graduate before they start exploring how to apply their knowledge and skills.
- **False assumption #3. People past a certain age should no longer work.** It is astounding that our society has accepted an economic model of retirement that implies that people past an arbitrary age should no longer be contributing members of the economy. It is true people often want to change the way they work or the nature of the work they do as they get older. But encouraging people to stop working entirely is unhealthy. People do not do well when they have nothing to do. And “discarding” highly experienced workers is damaging to economies that are facing a growing shortage of specialized skills.

Learning and working should be viewed as a single continuum between acquiring knowledge and using knowledge. We might shift focus from one to the other at different times. But everyone should always think of themselves as both a student and worker. Similarly, people should never think once they reach a certain age they are no longer valuable as employees. Rather than “retiring”, it is better to talk about transitioning toward different types of working and learning. For example, focusing on teaching others instead of doing work ourselves. Or developing and using new skills to add different types of value.

The concepts of “graduation” and “retirement” serve to divide our lives into three phases: young student, middle aged employee, and old retiree. This division is false, unhealthy, and economically damaging. The concept of graduation suggests there is time when we should stop learning. The concept of retirement suggests there is time we should stop adding value through work. When we are learning we are developing. When we are working we are contributing. These are things we should aspire to do every day we are alive. Never graduate, never retire. Just live.