

The Myth of Professional Decline: Why Our Best Years May Be Ahead

By Joe Kreuz

Not long ago, I read an article titled “*Your Professional Decline Is Coming (Much) Sooner Than You Think*.” The image that accompanied it was striking: a man standing at the top of a staircase marked with ages—30, 40, 50—before the inevitable steps downward into 60 and 70. The message was clear: enjoy your peak, because what follows is decline.

At my age, I couldn’t disagree more.

It got me thinking of two friends of mine—one in the nonprofit world and the other in business. One founded a nonprofit that hasn’t even hit its stride nationally. The other hasn’t fully handed over the reins to his Gen X son, and for good reason—his wisdom remains indispensable. Or consider the many professionals in their 50s and 60s, all thriving in new roles. For them, this stage of life feels less like a decline and more like a beginning. As Winston Churchill once said: “Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”

Ironically, my very first Buffalo News “My View” piece was about Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. Miller’s tragic character Willy Loman embodies what happens when someone believes their worth has an expiration date. He is consumed by the fear of being forgotten, convinced that once his best-selling years are behind him, his life no longer has meaning.

I think often of my own parents as the opposite example. My dad lived to age 90, and my mom—now 94—has managed to avoid the thralls of a nursing home thanks to strong health and determination. Many of us Boomers are doing our best to stay active and engaged, defying the script that says we fade into irrelevance.

Willy Loman’s plight was a cautionary tale for Miller’s generation. But for ours, it’s an outdated narrative. I know countless men and women whose

wisdom, networks, and steady judgment make them more valuable to their organizations—and to society—than ever before.

The truth is, age brings a unique currency: experience. AI may be changing everything, but companies still crave leaders who can connect dots quickly, draw from decades of problem-solving, and steady the ship when storms hit. You don’t learn that in business school, and you don’t always pick it up in your 20s or 30s.

A friend of mine recently hired a Boomer and told me, “This is exactly what we needed. Someone who’s seen the movie before.” That doesn’t sound like decline. That sounds like irreplaceable value.

Reinvention, Not Retirement

Another myth is that by 50 or 60, people are winding down. In reality, many are winding up. I’ve watched friends reinvent themselves—taking on new ventures, joining boards, even starting companies. Some leave behind jobs that drained them, stepping into roles that finally align with their purpose.

Many retired friends of mine are enjoying their pensions and 401(k)s, but others are restless for new horizons. One friend told me, “My spouse and I are driving each other nuts at the kitchen table. Find me something!” I recently called a retired Big Four partner and joked, “Are you sick of golf yet? Ready for some walking-around money?” For him, the answer was yes—and it turned into a high-profile consulting gig that keeps him engaged about 20 hours a month.

Not Ready to Retire

Sports often give us the clearest examples of what’s possible later in life. Take Pete Carroll, the longtime NFL head coach. At over 70 years old, Carroll is still patrolling the sidelines with the same energy and enthusiasm as coaches half his age.

A recent headline captured it perfectly: “*Not Ready to Retire*.”

Carroll hasn’t slowed down—he’s still building teams, adapting to new strategies, and motivating players in one of the most competitive environments imaginable. If professional decline were inevitable, he wouldn’t still be thriving at the highest level of football.

His story proves the point: the 70s don’t have to be a winding down. For many, it can be the most impactful decade yet.

Interestingly, the Wall Street Journal recently ran a piece by Suzy Welch asking, “Is Gen Z Unemployable?” She argued that hiring managers prize achievement and learning, while today’s youth prize pleasure and individuality.

But here’s the irony: older professionals are often dismissed for being “too set in their ways,” while younger ones are written off as “too self-focused.” Both narratives miss the point. What makes any generation employable isn’t their age—it’s their adaptability, drive, and ability to keep learning.

As I’ve said before, my kids often serve as my focus group. They’ve helped me see that Gen Z values aren’t a threat to the workplace—they’re a recalibration. And in many ways, those values pair perfectly with the wisdom of older generations who’ve weathered decades of change.

We should retire the staircase metaphor with its grim march upward and inevitable stumble down. A better metaphor might be a series of plateaus, each offering a broader view as we climb higher. Or perhaps a bridge, stretching out further than we imagined, built on the foundation of the years that came before.

Willy Loman’s story ends in despair because he saw no worth in himself beyond his peak years. But life offers us another ending. At 50, 60, or 70, your value doesn’t vanish. It compounds.

So to that headline—“Your professional decline is coming sooner than you think.” I would counter with this: **Your professional renaissance is closer than you realize.**



Pete Carroll among coaches working into 70s, opting for team building over retirement

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