“We’re on the cusp of potential boomer retirement, people have talked about it for a while, and now it’s happening.”

—DAVID FOOTE
Consulting peers over a demographic cliff

BY CARL FRIESEN, CMC, MBA

Often called “the pig in the python” by demographers, Canada’s Baby Boom generation, born between 1947 and 1966, has been a powerful force in the economy. They’ve had elementary schools built for them, then high schools, followed by colleges and universities. Now, there is talk of the need for more elder-care facilities and hospitals.
Born right at the peak of the Boom, I’m both blessed and cursed by having this huge part of the population marching through life right alongside me.

This issue was popularized by University of Toronto economist David Foote, whose book Boom, Bust & Echo sat on the Canadian best-seller lists for three years following its publication in 1996.

Over the past 15 years, Foote has watched as the Baby Boom cohort has moved through working life to the point that the oldest Boomers are turning 64. “We’re on the cusp of potential Boomer retirement,” he says. “People have talked about it for a while, and now it’s happening.”

Speaking as a consultant himself as well as author and speaker, Foote believes that this will spark major changes in the management consulting profession.

For one thing, many 60-ish Boomers won’t want to completely stop working: while they may ‘retire’ from their jobs, they’ll start a whole new way of working as consultants, maybe to their previous employers.

**Life expectancy in Canada has risen by two years each decade for the past 50 years, Foote says, so that a typical 65-year-old today can expect another 20 years of life.**

Recent increases in life expectancy have been due to the success of medical science in prolonging the end of life, he says, and many of these years are healthy and potentially productive.

These ‘young-old’ people may want to work two or three days a week, or on projects that last several months with a break in between. They will want freedom and flexibility, and instead of the mortgage and expenses of their child-rearing years, they now have pensions and savings. Consulting firms that adapt to utilize the skills and experience of retired Boomers may gain a competitive advantage.

To remain competitive, however, any employee wanting a smooth transition from salary to consultancy needs to stay current in several ways, Foote counsels.

That includes actively building contacts among younger people within potential client companies, so that one’s contacts do not all graduate to the golf course at the same time.

This is one reason Foote recommends cross-generational teams in consulting firms; pairing a 55-year-old’s experience with a 25-year-old’s fresh viewpoint and need to learn about the profession.

For their part, older consultants can give a firm an understanding of the needs of an older population and thanks to the Boom, this is a large market. This might include design of products such as mobile devices with larger screens and keyboards, and vehicles that are easier to enter and exit.

Another reason to build contacts among younger people is for help staying current with technology and the way work is done. “The young have always been the champions of new technology,” Foote says. He adds that younger consultants are in position to help older consultants connect with younger clients.

Patrick McKenna, Edmonton-based principal of McKenna & Associates Inc., who consults strategically to professional services firms, agrees that the generational hand-over is of concern to consulting firms. Boomer consultants whose contacts within their client companies are of the same age can be a risk to continuity, McKenna says. If their client contacts retire, the firm may lose the client to a competitor with younger contacts.

“There is ample statistical evidence that if the corporate client has many points of contact within the consulting firm, this means greater loyalty,” he says. It’s more than a generational thing, he points out: having consultants from several disciplines can also help maintain and grow the business.

To McKenna, professional firms face a stark choice when there is one member of the firm who is the overall controlling force in the relationship with the client: build more points of contact into the client, or risk losing the relationship when the lead contact retires. The key is in taking the onus off the individual relationship to one that is more broad-based within the consulting firm and the client, he says.

In his consulting experience, McKenna says that in practice, the ‘800 pound gorilla’ partner, who won’t share contacts with the rest of the firm, is a rarity.

McKenna sees rapid change in the services that consulting firms offer, and the technologies they use to deliver them. Some Boomer-age consultants may resist learning and adapting, he says, taking the attitude “Lord, give me five more years and I’m out of here.”

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Suzanne Lowe of Expertise Marketing, a consultancy based in Concord, MA, says that one of the changes affecting Boomers and the firms in which they work is the whole delivery model and value proposition for management consultants.

**Much of this is based on the digital revolution**

Previously, the value proposition of most management consultants was based on knowledge they had that their clients didn’t, Lowe says. Now, with fast-growing online content and increasingly sophisticated tools for zeroing in on the information they need, it’s increasingly likely that clients will be able to inform themselves on issues they are facing. In some cases, it’s because of their participation in online forums through sites such as LinkedIn.

Many professional firms feel under pressure to take their carefully-developed wisdom, long held behind their own firewall and inside the heads of their consultants, and make it freely available online. It’s how they build credibility with their clients and customers, and show that they have what it takes to get results for their clients.

As a parallel, consider the shift in the knowledge relationship that medical practitioners started to feel years ago. They found that patients would come to them armed with fistfuls of Internet printouts on their symptoms, possibly with their own minds made up about a diagnosis and what pharmaceuticals would treat what ailed them. Some of this information was spurious, out of date and incomplete, but it changed the doctor-patient relationship irreversibly.

Doctors no longer had a monopoly on knowledge.

This same trend, Lowe says, is being felt in consulting. Clients can be as knowledgeable as their consultants. It means that the consultants’ value has shifted from information provision to execution. In many cases, this means using advanced electronic tools to manage projects, share tasks between consultant, client, and third parties, and analyze the workflow to find and fix bottlenecks.

As well as good technology, clients increasingly value a particularly effective methodology for analyzing a problem or opportunity, and recommending a solution.

Older consultants, accustomed to the previous ecosystem in consulting, may have trouble adapting to the new realities, Lowe says. In this, she echoes David Foote’s recommendation for cross-generational teams. However, older consultants have a wealth of knowledge to offer about the nuances of developing a client relationship and keeping it on track, she says, as well as building “share of wallet” within each client.

Consulting firms, and individual consultants – whatever their age – who learn to work within the new realities have a chance to gain competitive advantage and continue to offer value to their clients.

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**ONE BOOMER’S EXPERIENCE**

**BY CARL FRIESEN, CMO, MBA**

In my own independent, Boomer-age consulting practice, I’ve found that staying current with technology and business is very much a generational thing.

At one end of the spectrum, I recently worked with a client in Rhode Island in his late 60s who’d built several successful companies based largely on his charm and selling ability. Now, he wanted my help in writing a book on sales, on which to build a consulting practice.

In the book, he recommended old-style cold-calling; walking into a prospect’s premises with the expectation of an immediate meeting with someone with buying authority. This might have worked in the years when he was building his business, but not any more, showing that at least in some ways, his understanding of business realities was sadly out of date.

I find that staying current on developments demands constant investment in learning. It’s also a straightforward business problem: the kind of make-or-buy decision process I learned in business school.

For example, when I bought a digital camera for use in my business a few years ago, I found I needed to learn to manage and retouch the images on screen. I could have outsourced this work, but decided to learn it myself. To do this, I arranged for a twentysomething art student from my church to teach me. In about an hour in a coffee shop, she taught me some tricks in iPhoto I’d never have found out on my own. That was $100 well spent. For me, electronic photo retouching was clearly a make decision.

In other cases, it’s a buy. Faced with the need to update my website, I thought of investing the time in learning to do my own design. But I decided that developing my skills to the point I could deliver credible results was not worth it for me. So I found two students at Toronto’s Humber College, for whom working with a client to produce a website was part of their curriculum. I told them what I wanted, and they made it happen. Part of the arrangement was that they would also show me how to keep the site up to date.

During my career I’ve had to learn dozens of technologies, many of which have since tiptoed into history. This includes the early Internet concepts like Gopher sites, Freerings, SLIP, Archie, Usenet, and .alt groups. Now, it’s Twitter, Facebook, and Google+. My investment in learning continues, and it’s been fun.