

BUSINESS BOOMERS

More experienced workers becoming their own boss

BY ROB AMEN

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Walt Ogrodnik toiled for 15 years with an information technology company in Robinson, rising to the rank of chief operating officer, before the now-defunct Internet provider Stargate bought the company in 2009.

Within six months, Stargate laid off Ogrodnik, leaving the 49-year-old Upper St. Clair resident living off a severance package and pondering his next move.

Now 55, Ogrodnik owns one business, Interface Financial Group, and is chief executive officer of another, HazardGuard Safety Wire, operating both from the comforts of his home.

"As you get older, in your profession, you want to call your own shots," Ogrodnik said. "Not that I couldn't be a good soldier if I had to be. But I felt my skills were more inclined to be my own boss."

A growing number of people 50 and older are going into business for themselves. Some lost their jobs to downsizing or outsourcing. Others retired early but still need supplemental income. Still others

Biz help

Considering going into business for yourself? These groups might be able to help:

AARP: 1-866-389-5654

The Entrepreneur's Source: 412-364-6313

International Franchise Association: 202-628-8000

National Association for the Self-Employed: 1-800-232-6273

National Association of Working Seniors: 805-619-4524

Small Business Development Center at Duquesne University: 412-396-6233
U.S. Small Business Administration: 412-395-6560

ers enjoy working.

About half of all self-employed workers are older than 50, and a third of those who are self-employed and age 51 to 69 started their businesses at or after they turned 50, according to AARP.

"There's a lot of competition for the jobs," said Gene Fairbrother, lead business consultant for the National Association for the Self-Employed. "You have a 55-, 60-year-old individual who may be able to provide five, six, seven, eight, nine years in that position vs. a 35-year-old who has some experience who hopefully will provide 20 or 25 years with that company."

"There's still a tendency to look at the need factor and the age factor in the hiring process. It may not be politically correct, but it's the real world."

Ron Margeson knows all about it. He was 55, and vice president of sales for Tuscarora Inc., a packaging company in New Brighton, Beaver County, when it was bought by a large Swedish firm, SCA.

Two years later, Margeson and other upper-level managers were phased out. "Let's talk about Westinghouse, US Air, U.S. Steel. Thirty years ago those were stellar companies you spent your career with. What happened?" asked Margeson, now 59, of Ohio Township. "The whole corporate scene has changed so dramatically over the past 10 years. A lot

of people are saying, 'It happened to my neighbor. It happened to my friend. Maybe I should look around before it happens to me.'"

Margeson turned to The Entrepreneur's Source, a business-ownership consulting company that helps people find alternative career options. Margeson was so enamored with the company that instead of buying a franchise, as he had considered, he joined the consulting firm and now helps others who are in situations similar to his.

Everyone has a unique story. James Buckley, 52, of Fawn, for years considered starting his own graphic-design company. He was a marketing and advertising guru for a steel company two years ago when he left to give it a try.

"Shortly after I made my announcement, they got bought out by someone, and I would have been gone anyway," Buckley said.

Buckley's Inward Vision company is now reality, based in Etna.

Mary Coleman's vision, on the other hand, involved rugs.

Coleman, 56, of Lawrenceville, weaved rugs, but it wasn't until she was divorced 12 years ago that she attempted to parlay her talent into a business.

"I knew I couldn't make a living (only) weaving rugs," she said, "so I decided to open a gallery on the first floor of my home and invite other people to show and display their work."

The Gallery on 43rd Street was born.

"I wanted to be self-employed and not work for anybody else," she said. "It was important to explore that and have that free-

It came at a cost: Coleman was forced to work side jobs, including at a coffee shop and dry cleaner, to support the gallery.

"It's still tough from time to time, but Lawrenceville really seems to be riding this wave these days," she said. "There have been sleepless nights, but I wouldn't have changed the way it happened."

One of Coleman's neighbors, Joanne Yalch, also is riding the Lawrenceville wave.

Yalch, 53, opened a bead store, Crystal Bead Bazaar, on Butler Street three years ago despite having no prior ownership experience.

"I managed a coffee shop," Yalch said. "My husband said, 'I'm really tired of seeing you make money for others.'"

maker, pursued a business focused on her hobby.

She attended a seminar at Duquesne University's Small Business Development Center, wrote a business plan and opened shop four months later.

"I pulled all equity out of my home," said Yalch, whose husband's job paid the family's bills while Crystal Bead Bazaar worked out its kinks. "It's very scary. I just plunged right in."

It literally paid off. "Well beyond my expectations," she said. "It's extremely gratifying. Every day I'm amazed."

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