

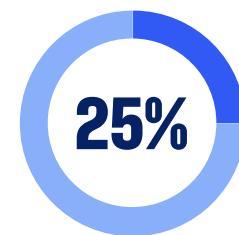
# Why Americans over age 55 need a more visible and viable path to business ownership through solopreneurship

An unprecedented number of Americans want to continue working, earning, and contributing to society well past traditional retirement age. According to Gallup, 41% of today's employees expect to work beyond age 65. That desire is impacting policy planning, corporate strategies, and workforce projections. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that by 2031, U.S. workers age 55 and older will make up about 25% of the workforce. It's expected that by 2031 the global workforce will include 150 million more workers over age 55 than it does today.

What's driving the widespread interest in working longer? Longevity, in tandem with healthier, more active lifespans and economic necessity are the primary factors. Many Americans over age 55 need additional earnings to meet their current expenses. Many more are concerned about outliving their savings. According to a TIAA Institute survey, one in eight Americans (13%) age 22 to 75 say they're not sure how they'll fund retirement (Kolluri et al., 2023). Beyond improving financial security, older adults express a strong desire to continue to use their expertise, feel a sense of purpose, and stay socially connected through work. Full-time employees who are over age 55 rank "interesting work" and "autonomy" as their top priorities, with "good compensation" and "flexibility/good hours" ranked a bit lower (Root et al., 2023). Retirees and unemployed adults hoping to reenter the workforce prioritize financial stability, closely followed by the desire for social connection and community engagement (GetSetUp, 2024).

Policy discussions often focus on how the aging workforce will impact employers and career opportunities for younger generations. Far less attention is given to options and opportunities available to workers over age 55 who are pinning their hopes for financial security and productive aging on the long-term availability of work that is compensated fairly, independent, and engaging. Unfortunately, employment data indicate that such hopes rest on a very shaky foundation.

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of the U.S. workforce will  
be age 55 and older by 2031

For older adults, the desire to stay with their employer is often derailed by layoffs, poor health, adverse working conditions, or family issues. A 2023 TIAA Insights Report says that “only about 43 percent of women and 61 percent of men are steadily employed throughout their 50s, and those who lack steady employment in their 50s are much less likely to be working in their 60s” (Truesdale & Berkman). According to the AARP, many of those who work into their 60s experience age discrimination and lack of reasonable accommodation on the job, often driving them out of the workforce. In search of alternative work opportunities, older adults have turned to freelance or gig work in increasing numbers. But most freelancers work fewer than 15 hours weekly (MBO Partners, 2024) and gig work is often poorly compensated, lacks employee benefits, and can involve arbitrary, erratic hours.

Is there another, potentially more attractive option for the millions of Americans who want to continue working past traditional retirement age? Yes. That option is to become a solopreneur. Simply put, a solopreneur is a person who sets up a business for which they’re the sole employee. A solopreneur is both the owner and the workforce of their business.

#### SOLOPRENEUR-BUSINESS OWNER AND SOLE EMPLOYEE

Fastest growing form of  
entrepreneurship in the U.S.



Solopreneurship is the fastest-growing form of entrepreneurship in the U.S. among all age cohorts. It offers significant advantages to new business owners in their 50s, 60s and 70s. Nonetheless, this path to a longer working life is seldom top of mind for older Americans. Changing that will require a coordinated effort to make solopreneurship a more visible and viable option for workers over 55.

## The advantages of small-business ownership over age 55

The attractions of business ownership at any age include independence, flexibility, and the satisfaction of putting your skills and expertise to work for yourself. While revenues and profits will vary based on the nature of the business and goals of the individual owner, digitally savvy solopreneurs can work from home, set their own hours, and expand business services and revenues at their own pace. The benefits of solopreneurship correspond closely to the priorities employees highlight as goals for working beyond retirement age. Additional advantages of business ownership

over freelance work include potential tax benefits and self-employment retirement options for small-business owners.

Every new business comes with intrinsic risks as well as rewards. It’s well documented that a significant percentage of startups shut down within five years. However, research on small-business formation and growth rates show that companies started by founders over age 50 are much more likely to become profitable and to stay in business for a longer period of time (Cronin, 2021).

#### COMPANIES FOUNDED BY THOSE AGE 50+

More likely to become profitable  
and stay in business longer

Barriers to operating a profitable small business as a solopreneur have never been lower. The availability of low-cost digital platforms, increasingly capable AI tools, and freelance contract support have combined to radically reduce the cost of new-business formation. With motivation, supportive coaching, and training, mastering the entrepreneurial strategies and core business skills needed to become a small-business owner is much more within reach.

It’s no surprise then, that starting a small business is by far the most popular entrepreneurship path in the U.S. Contrary to the popular perception that large, well-branded corporations are the dominant form of doing business, according to the Small Business Administration (SBA) the 33.2 million small businesses (as of 2023) account for 99.9% of all U.S. businesses. An estimated 6.7% of the U.S. adult population were engaged in owning and running an established small business during 2023, with the definition of “established” being that the business paid salaries, wages, or other payments to the owners and any employees for more than 42 months (Dyvik, 2024).

Less well known is that more than 80 % of these small businesses, about 27 million, are solopreneur firms. A recent report on the age and gender of all small-business owners (with and without employees) estimates that 40% of these owners are baby boomers, 47% are part of Gen X, and only 13% are millennials. Historically, most business owners have been males. This ownership gap has been narrowing over the past five years, and today females own 43.4% of U.S. small businesses.

It should be noted that these demographics are based on the estimated age of small-business owners who are currently operating a business, and not a reflection of their age when the business started. Most today’s older owners started their companies decades ago, not when they were 55 and over.

## Roadblocks to solopreneurship over age 55

Despite the significant advantages and relatively low risks of small-business ownership, older workers still confront a number of roadblocks that can prevent them from achieving this goal. One report, “The Missing Entrepreneurs,” notes that if workers over 50 started new businesses at the same rate as those who are between 30 and 49, there would be an additional 21 million older entrepreneurs in the 38 countries served by the intergovernmental group Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). As summarized in this report, the major barriers faced by older workers are:

- Skills gaps in the areas of business management and digital tools
- Lack of confidence in the ability to learn entrepreneurial skills
- Outdated professional networks, especially for retired workers, or those starting a business unrelated to their previous experience
- Difficulty accessing financing for a new business from investors and lenders
- Age discrimination among potential customers and vendors
- Lack of awareness of the opportunities for small business owners
- Lack of awareness and difficulty in accessing the resources and training that are available
- Declining health

Understandably, these roadblocks can seem insurmountable to older workers with no experience in business ownership. While age discrimination is a persistent social reality, and declining health may be an inevitable long-term challenge, the widespread lack of awareness about opportunities, training, and other resources, and a corresponding lack of confidence, are issues that can and should be addressed.

What’s needed is a collaborative effort by the public and private sectors to develop a state-of-the-art solopreneurship platform designed to provide older adults with a road map that illustrates the steps in becoming a successful small-business owner. Such a solopreneurship platform would be designed to engage its users in sequential phases of exploration, reflection, skills building, and business planning, followed by launching and living a solopreneur career—all with 24/7 access to interactive resources and coaching. The platform would be populated with the resources appropriate to each stage. Users would access the platform through a portal customized to match their individual interests and goals.

A number of programs are already dedicated to training and supporting aspiring small-business owners. For example, the SBA provides a national network of local offices, extensive online resources, and SCORE mentors. ([SCORE](#) is the nation’s largest network of volunteer, expert business mentors and is dedicated to helping small businesses plan, launch, manage and grow.) It’s tempting to think that simply increasing awareness and access to such resources would be enough to remove the roadblocks. But valuable as they are, most of the existing programs have limitations. They’re not equipped to meet the needs of millions of new users. Few are designed around essential best practices that have demonstrated success in building confidence and resilience in older adults as they learn and apply new skills. The training offered by existing programs also tends to center on traditional business ownership models rather than the digital platforms, emerging AI tools, and other skills that are essential for solopreneurs today and into the future.

That said, a project to develop the conceptual solopreneurship over 55 platform would prioritize collaboration with existing programs and resource providers, and would integrate a significant number of the excellent training modules and other resources that have been a mainstay of development and support for small-business owners in the U.S.

## Recommended modules for the solopreneurship over 55 platform

### Stage 1: Find role models, engage with peers, and build a realistic road map

Increasing the visibility of the path to small-business ownership/solopreneurship for older adults is an essential first step. The popular narrative of entrepreneurship in America features tech companies started by young men aiming to become billionaires and backed by millions in venture investment. These stories hardly ever feature diverse over-55 founders of profitable, stable small companies. What differentiates often-reported failures from spectacular successes remains a mystery.

Two important best practices for increasing the visibility of the path to solopreneurship are providing diverse role models who will share their experiences from idea to launch to profitability (seldom a straight line) and building a personalized road map based on the predictable growth stages and challenges that characterize any new business.

### Stage 2: Reflect on personal motivations and strengths

A stage of guided exploration and self-discovery is the next best practice. With literally millions of paths and solopreneurship business models available, a process of reflecting on motivations and matching goals with strengths and opportunities increases confidence in taking the next

step, or possibly deciding that solopreneurship is not a good match or the time isn't right to proceed.

**Stage 3: Develop core business skills and a plan to launch**

For older adults who are ready to move to the next stage of updating their skills and planning their business, working with instructors and learners who are also over 55 increases the likelihood that participants will complete the program, and launch their solopreneur business.

**Stage 4: Adapt and advance**

Even the best-prepared solopreneur will encounter setbacks. As individuals will have discovered from building their road map and engaging with peer solopreneurs in Stage 1, most new companies need to adjust their plans and sometimes even pivot to a different business model. The need to adapt isn't a sign of failure; it's a predictable phase of growth. So best practices include the availability of peer support, expanded partner networks, and access to updated resources for several years after the business launch.

## Opportunities to provide support

Colleges and universities should consider the implications of an aging society on their value propositions and bottom lines—and the myriad ways higher education can positively

contribute to the growth of solopreneurship. Support can take the form of a curriculum focused on solopreneurship best practices, workshops, certificate programs, and networking convenings. Older faculty might be engaged both as teachers and learners in this context.

The concept of solopreneurship should also be explored as part of the retirement planning process for all workers over age 55. Understanding the personal and financial benefits of business ownership could shift the focus of prospective retirees from reluctance to end their careers to the opportunities of beginning another chapter. Solopreneurship will undoubtedly gain traction over time, even among young adults who are envisioning quite different working lives than those of their parents. But now is the time to pave the way for individuals approaching traditional retirement age who just aren't ready to retire.



Make solopreneurship part of the retirement process.

Shift focus from reluctance to retire among workers 55+ to opportunity to begin a new chapter.

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