



Boomers, Retirees, and the Mature Adult Learner

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

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One Size Doesn't Fit All – Differences Among Boomer Learners, Retirees, and the Mature Adult Learner

A lot of research has been conducted over the last few years to help illustrate the reality that adult learners are far from a homogeneous group. While a significant portion of the research has focused on younger generations, specifically Gen Z and Millennials, less has been conducted on professionals 50 and older. Additionally, the Great Resignation has largely been driven by this group that can afford to retire but may prefer not to. Understanding their learning and content needs, content delivery preferences, motivations, and unique qualities could help institutions of higher education further refine their portfolio of offerings and marketing strategies.

To better understand boomer, retiree, and mature adult learners' educational needs, preferences, qualities, and motivations, UPCEA and MindEdge developed a brief survey. The survey took place on February 23 and 24, 2022. An internet panel was used and 997 individuals participated, of which 546 completed the entire survey.

Executive Summary

- The **main motivation** for continuing education among all mature adult learners is **personal growth/enjoyment** (23%), followed by **keeping the mind active** (21%), **increasing knowledge** (17%), and **career/job** (16%).
- Respondents are **more interested in non-career skills** (personal enrichment and life skills), **than career skills** (job upskilling and career reskilling).
- Among different credentials and offerings, respondents have the **greatest interest in short courses or modules** (84% interested or extremely interested), followed by a **single day seminar** (78%), and **professional certifications** (58%).
- The **most appealing method for the delivery of continuing education is an online format**. Nearly a third (32%) of respondents were extremely interested in a fully online format, compared to face-to-face (11%) and hybrid learning (10%).
- Respondents agree that the **cost of a program is the most important factor** (54% extremely important) when considering continuing their education.

To best represent and understand the generational and demographic differences of survey respondents, four personas were created and tracked to present four segments. These were utilized to demonstrate how age and employment status markers influence the behaviors, motivations, and preferences of mature adult learners.

Who Are Our Mature Adult Learners?



Madeline (52)

Madeline represents individuals who are 50 to 55 years old and employed full-time. Madeline is professionally motivated; she wants to develop new skills that will assist in advancing her career and making more money.



Joshua (57)

Joshua represents individuals who are 56 to 60 years old and unemployed. Though currently unemployed, he is not quite ready for retirement. He wishes to gain new skills and wants to continue his education for his own personal enjoyment; however, he highly values freedom and flexibility in his studies.



Norman (63)

Norman represents individuals who are 61 to 65 years old and recently retired. Norman wishes to expand his knowledge and stay sharp. He seeks to continue his education for personal growth and enjoyment.



Lisa (71)

Lisa represents individuals who are over 65 years old and retired. Lisa is not extremely motivated to learn new skills or subjects. She is satisfied with her current state of life and doesn't feel driven to seek out higher education.

What Are the Main Motivations to Continue Education for Mature Adult Learners?

The main motivation for continuing education among all mature adult learners is personal growth/enjoyment (23%), followed by keeping the mind active (21%), increasing knowledge (17%), and career/job (16%). Younger age groups among the 50+ age group are more motivated by money and career/job advancement, while older age groups are more motivated by their own personal growth/enjoyment and to keep their mind active.



Madeline's (52) main motivations for learning include career & job growth, personal growth & enjoyment, and earning more money.



Norman's (63) main motivations for learning include keeping his mind active, personal growth & enjoyment, and increasing knowledge.

Which Educational Topics Are of Interest for Mature Adult Learners?

When given a list of skills, training, and educational topics, over half (56%) of respondents cited interest in personal enrichment, 46% in technology training, and 39% in life skills. For the most part, respondents were more interested in non-career skills (personal enrichment and life skills) than career skills (job upskilling and career reskilling). Older age groups are more interested in personal enrichment, technology training, and life skills, while younger age groups are more interested in job upskilling and career reskilling.



Lisa's (71) top educational topics of interest include personal enrichment, life skills, and technology training.



Madeline's (52) top educational topics of interest include technology training, job upskilling, and personal enrichment.

Which Credentials or Offerings Are of Interest for Mature Adult Learners?

When given a list of credentials and offerings, participants were asked how interested they would be in pursuing each one if they were focused on a subject area, they had an interest in. Among potential credentials and offerings, respondents had the greatest interest in short courses or modules (84% interested or extremely interested), followed by a single-day seminar (78%), and professional certifications (58%). Respondents were least interested in bachelor's degrees and associate's degrees.



Joshua (57) is most interested in pursuing a short course or module among all credentials and offerings.



Norman (63) is most interested in pursuing a short course or module among all credentials and offerings.

Which Delivery Formats Are Most Appealing to Mature Adult Learners?

Participants were asked to rate their interest in different delivery formats for learning new skills, learning about new subjects, receiving additional training, or continuing their education. The most appealing method for the delivery of continuing education was an online format. Nearly a third (32%) of respondents were extremely interested in a fully online format, compared to face-to-face (11% extremely interested) and hybrid learning (10%). Interest in an online delivery format slightly decreases with age, as younger age groups are more interested than older age groups.



Madeline (52) is the most interested in an online delivery format (55% extremely interested).



Lisa (71) is the least interested in an online delivery format (17% extremely interested).

What Are the Most Important Factors when Deciding to Continue Education?

Respondents agreed that the cost of a program is the most important factor (54% extremely important) when considering continuing their education. Other extremely important factors include the reputation of the provider (46%), freedom to complete classwork on their own time (42%), and preferred delivery format (31%). The least important factor is the ability to advance their careers, with 17% agreeing it is not at all important.



Norman's (63) most important factor is the reputation of the provider, and his least important is the ease of finding a job after completion.



Joshua's (57) most important factor is the cost of the program, and his least important is the ability to advance his career.

What's Next?

The boomer generation is swiftly coming into retirement and higher education institutions must adapt accordingly. While many retirees have less interest in gaining skills towards career advancement than younger age groups, a significant portion are still interested in continuing their education. Institutions must offer flexible, supportive, and skills-based programs in order to match the needs of this particular adult learner audience.

The above findings represent only a fraction of the survey data pertaining to the educational preferences of boomers, retirees, and mature adult learners. In the coming months, UPCEA and MindEdge will be hosting a webinar and releasing a comprehensive white paper detailing further findings from the mature adult learner survey.