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# Bad for Business

## How the Tech Industry's Avoidance of Older Applicants May Be Hurting It

By Gary M. Stern

**A** 2013 study by *Payscale*, a compensation information company based in Seattle, revealed that few high-tech companies hire many employees 50 years and older to their workforces. In fact, only six of the 32 companies surveyed had a median age higher than 35, and the average age of employees at Facebook, Google, and AOL was 28, 29, and 30, respectively.

Yet, in April 2014, the Pew Research Center reported that 59 percent of seniors go online regularly and 77 percent use a cell phone.

The message from the technology industry is clear: Employees 50 years and older aren't welcome — and at most high-tech companies, they don't even pop up on the radar screen despite their increasing use of the internet and mobile devices.

One of the problems is that many higher ups in Silicon Valley-based companies believe younger people bring more to the workplace. In fact, a December 2015 *Fast Company* article notes that Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg once stated, "Young people are smarter. Why are most chess masters

under 30?" In addition, copy in a recent recruitment ad placed by tech company ServiceNow reads, "We Want People Who Have Their Best Work Ahead of Them. Not Behind Them."

Richard Gabriel, a 66-year-old member of the research team at multinational technology company IBM and former president of artificial intelligence company Lucid, says that leading high-tech firms hire younger employees because "they're cheaper, not as far along in their careers, take direction more easily, don't have families, and can work a huge number of hours." Furthermore, programming today compared with programming 30 years ago relies on more powerful machines, more apps, and on open sourcing versus machines with limited memories.

But Gabriel says technology companies may be paying a price for overlooking seasoned programmers and other staff. "You lose the experience of having seen many business and software-related situations and being able to diagnose things more quickly," he says. "The baby boomers often design better, code slightly better, and interact with

other programmers a little better."

Experienced staff members, he adds, "know how to look at products and customer service in a more diversified way."

Indeed, companies can make mistakes that impede the progress of product launches and other developments. If CEOs and management had older, more seasoned employees to consult with, Gabriel says "they could avoid the mistakes that keep them from rising to the top."

However, some specialized tech companies are taking more steps to hire such employees. At Unilog — an India-based B2B ecommerce platform with a growing presence in the U.S. — nearly a quarter of its 22 U.S.-based employees are age 50 and older; this number includes managers, vice presidents, and staff in customer service and sales.

President of Unilog North America Suchit Bachall says there are so few employees age 50 and older at most high-tech firms because their staffs tend to mirror the ages of their customers. "If you look at Facebook or Instagram, their customers are millennials," he says. "The

thought process is that a company with younger employees can service people who are young."

Conversely, many of Unilog's customers are 55 or older, reflecting its more experienced staff. Bachalli compares Unilog to Microsoft and SAP—a German multinational software corporation—which are mature firms that hire seasoned staff, he says.

However, he doesn't believe most technology companies are consciously discriminating against older applicants. At most of these firms, Bachalli says, the boss and hiring managers are 27-year-olds and feel more comfortable recruiting people their own age. "It raises their comfort level," he says. "They don't want to worry about how [they are going to] manage a 50-year-old veteran employee."

He describes his own senior managers as possessing "process maturity." "We do



President of Unilog North America, Scott Bachalli (center) with the Unilog team.

less by trial and error and more by data and analysis," says Bachalli.

The veteran leaders, he says, operate by "the university of hard knocks" and "don't go on a whim and run with an idea"—an approach that he says can lead to improved

efficiency and better results.

Unilog North America is following in the footsteps of Google and Microsoft. As both companies matured, they brought in seasoned executives as CEOs—Eric Schmidt at Google and Steve Ballmer at Microsoft—and turned

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## WHERE CREATIVITY MEETS INNOVATION

RIT has become my community and the ChemE Department my home. The professors are kind and willing to help, even professors I have not yet had. MGAS (Multicultural Gender for Academic Success) has also been a huge part of my support system. I joined the RIT chapters: AIChE (American Institute of Chemical Engineers) and NSBE (National Society of Black Engineers) to get involved outside the classroom, and volunteered with WE@RIT. The professional organizations exposed me to fellow engineering students of all disciplines. Through WE@RIT, I introduced high school girls to engineering and all that RIT has to offer. I look forward to future experiences such as going on my first co-op. I know upon graduation I will be prepared to begin my career as a successful Chemical Engineer. I am exactly where I am supposed to be. I love RIT. GO TIGERS!!

to "mature, pedigreed executives from the outside to help younger managers."

According to Bachalli, any company culture that relies predominantly on one age group, whether that's 30-year-olds or 50-year-olds, is flawed. "If it is exclusive [to] that generation, and it cancels out other viewpoints, it's flawed," he says. "We're trying to build a meritocracy that has nothing to do with age and everything to do with metrics and performance."

Experienced companies seek a blend of both young and seasoned employees. Companies like General Motors and General Electric, Bachalli notes, "hire the best and the brightest [young people] from colleges around the world, but have great managers who have spent 20 years in the business [develop them]."

LaGuardia Community College in New York is one college that is helping prepare the over 40-year-olds for careers in new media and technology.

According to Seema Shah, its director of technology and innovation, the college serves 20,000 full-time students working toward an associate degree and 30,000 students in its adult and continuing education program.

Many of the older students take courses at night or on weekends while holding down full-time jobs. They pursue programs in game design, mobile and software development, and digital journalism. To keep pace with changes in the industry, LaGuardia also plans to introduce a cybersecurity associate degree next fall.

"There's a high level of demand for these jobs," Shah says. "We help train students of all ages to enter the tech sector."

She says that students who pursue jobs in the tech industry, no matter their age, must fit into a company's culture and be flexible, which could entail telecommuting or even working from

a coffee shop. But she notes specific key components for older employees to consider if trying to get hired by tech companies, including career coaching, internships, and cultural fit.

Shah adds that many people — not just baby boomers, but also minority, female, and LGBTQ candidates — face issues securing high-tech jobs.

In addition, Gabriel offers tech companies two recommendations: hire seasoned employees on a part-time or consulting basis to take advantage of their savvy, know-how, and experience; and employ mature staff as mentors and coaches to utilize their experience and enhance training for junior staff.

In the future, Gabriel believes startups will continue to recruit millennials but says that "a company that is maturing will tend to hire older staff." ■

Gary M. Stern is a contributing writer for *INSIGHT Into Diversity*.

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