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CREATIVITY, VALUE, AGE & EXPERIENCE: DO THEY ALL CORRELATE?

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Creativity, Value, Age, and Experience: Do They Correlate?

Written by: Jeff Popova-Clark

How old are you? It's a natural question, and, depending on circumstance, an uncomfortable one if you appear as too young or too old. The latter case often wins attention in legal systems in the guise of age discrimination against people judged as too elderly—with whatever that implies—to get a job done or to relate to youthful customers.

Author Jeff Popova-Clark makes the case that businesses often dismiss the talent resident at the other end of the age spectrum: people in their twenties. Revolutionary ideas involving science, art, and business organisation have been bubbling up from young people for centuries. Consider, for instance, the past 20 years of innovation in personal computing and the Internet. Social convention, however, often delays recognition of the breakthroughs for decades, as Popova-Clark discusses in his opening historical survey. Media images that depict creative giants in the autumn of their careers complete the stereotypical notion of the grey-haired genius.

With vivid argument, Popova-Clark urges executives to avoid stereotypes and conventional thinking about the source of valuable icon-smashing insights. Young people can look at old problems in new ways, free from the status quo. You might have the next Einstein or Wilbur Wright already within your organisation, ready to contribute if given an audience. Give him or her that opportunity.

Introduction by Van Wallach, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Washington

Famous Ideas

How old was Einstein when he revolutionised physics with his special theory of relativity? How old was Isaac Newton when he developed calculus? Darwin, when he conceived of evolution? Picasso, when he added a whole new dimension to the visual arts through cubism? What about Shakespeare when he penned *Romeo and Juliet*? Karl Marx, when he released his *Communist Manifesto*? Mozart, when he composed *Don Giovanni*? Maxwell, when he deduced the relationship between electricity and magnetism?

Not one was older than 32! *All* of the above ideas were conceived before the relevant genius turned 32. The actual answers are: 26 (Einstein), 23 (Newton), approximately 25 (Darwin), 26 (Picasso), 31 (Shakespeare), 30 (Marx), 31 (Mozart), and 24 (Maxwell). This is by no means an exhaustive list. It is surprisingly hard to find such disruptive ideas and creations originating from people older than 35.

Envisioning a Visionary

And yet, note the visual imagery evoked when we ponder names like Einstein, Darwin, and Marx. Although all three brought forth their most significant concepts while in their twenties, the portraits trundled out in their memories consistently depict men in their fifties and sixties. Try to imagine portraits of each of these men in their twenties, when they were conceiving their world-changing ideas. Difficult isn't it? Men in their twenties don't *look* like the thinkers that Einstein, Darwin, and Marx must have been. Our society is conditioned to think of genius and innovation as the domain of people (especially men) in their fifties and sixties.

Of particular note is that Newton, Darwin, and Maxwell did not publish their revolutionary discoveries until their mid-to-late forties. Personal communications and/or lecture notes show that all three had significantly developed their ideas 15 to 20 years before they were published. Why did these scientists feel that they had to wait for decades to release their most significant discoveries? Is there a lesson to be learnt here? For instance, Newton published some of his new

mathematics (which he called "fluxion") at the age of 23, whilst only a research fellow at Trinity College. The response was scathing criticism. Understandably, Newton did not formally publish his work on "fluxion" until he was 62, in 1704. By that time he was President of the Royal Society of London.

Competitive Advantage Through Misconception

Competitive advantage is often found in the misconceptions of the rest of your industry, environment, or market. If you can be sure everybody is unknowingly following an assumption that is patently false, you can gain competitive advantage purely by not making the same error.

So, to recap, we have established that some of the most original, icon-smashing, and valuable ideas have been produced by men ¹ in their twenties and early thirties. We have also established that society tends to portray and honour these intellectual heroes as they appeared in their elderly years.

Finally, we have noted that the world ignored or disparaged several of these discoveries until their inventors had reached a more acceptable, more "believable" age. How many similarly brilliant inspirations are tossed onto the scrap heap purely due to the age of the source? How much intellectual capital, indeed *competitive advantage*, has been squandered because of society's bias toward experience and age? Can you afford to ignore history's most proven source of valuable ideas in this dynamic, rapidly changing environment?

The number of educated people in our society has grown phenomenally in this century. Many of the world's companies employ more educated individuals than existed in the entire world in Newton's time. It is very likely that you possess at least one young Newton or Picasso or Marx in your very own organisation. Are you giving them the opportunity or the incentive to develop and express their ideas?

The examples given above are of scientists, philosophers, artists and musicians. There are few examples of young people being credited with revolutionary strategy from within established organisations. Have decision-makers in the world of commerce always ignored the ideas of the young and inexperienced? If so, we would expect to find brilliantly successful young people in business only in start-ups: At the age of 22, college dropout Bill Gates had co-founded Microsoft; Henry Ford had built and sold his first car by the age of 33; Anita Roddick founded The Body Shop at the age of 33; Jeff Bezos launched Amazon.com at the age of 29. How many people of their age participate in the creation of your business's strategy?

Experience: A Prerequisite for Your Company?

"In industry after industry, the terrain is changing so fast that experience is becoming irrelevant and even dangerous."

These are the words of Gary Hamel in his 1996 *Harvard Business Review* article, "Strategy as Revolution." Few would take issue with this observation, so the question is: why do we continue to demand x years of experience as a prerequisite for acknowledging a person's abilities? Why do we fill our boardrooms only with highly experienced executives? Why do we demand *deep industry knowledge* from our prospective employees and contractors? We already have organisations full of personnel with x years of experience in our industry. There is no denying that experience adds value, but should it be a prerequisite for entry into the ranks of your organisation's decision makers?

Experience *can* mean experience at doing things badly. Experience *can* result in less flexibility, greater investment in and protection of established practice, and less reflection on and questioning of why things are done in certain ways. Where is the competitive advantage in obtaining the exact methodologies and practices of your competitors from an "experienced" industry specialist? Won't those competitors have already discovered even better ways to compete by the time you have copied their strategies/practices (or the strategies/practices provided by the same industry specialist six months ago)? You don't need more redundant experience. What you need is to add something new to your organisation—something that is radical, something that can turn the status quo inside out!

Reinventing an industry is rarely achieved by someone who has many years' experience within that industry. Did Henry Ford or the Wright Brothers (both in their early 30s during their historic flights at Kitty Hawk) have 20 years' experience in the transport industry? Did J. Robert Oppenheimer and his colleagues (inventors of the atomic bombs) have 20 years' experience in weapons development? And yet reinvention is what is required in today's volatile markets.

So What?

Okay, you the reader may say: "I'm now aware of my bias toward age and experience. I'll make an effort to listen more to the younger/newer part of our firm. So what?"

First, when developing strategy, or any other creative process within your organisation, ensure that you include a healthy representation of younger, newer, and less-experienced personnel in the process. You also need to create an atmosphere in which those people will feel comfortable expressing and developing their ideas. Placing a token 21-year-old graduate in a room full of directors will not ensure that a fresh perspective has been injected into discussions. You also need to trust these people with the information they require to make meaningful contributions.

Second, when considering how an individual or supplier can add value to your organisation, do not ask how many years of experience they have in your industry. Ask instead about the radical tools and methods they have used to resolve problems in the past. Ask why they decided to use those solutions and what outcomes they achieved. Are they bringing learning from a wide variety of backgrounds, industries, and perspectives? Or are they carbon copies of your own executive team?

The Search for Problem Solvers

And when listening to their answers, don't assess how much they seem to understand your particular issues at the current time. Find out what they did to learn about and understand the issues in previous cases. Did they approach the problem with an open, inquisitive frame of mind, or did they stroll in as the all-knowing experts with the same solution for every situation? ²

In a nutshell, are they formulaically churning out familiar responses of little value or are they analysing each case with a fresh perspective—and only then, armed with the new knowledge of the recently naïve, are they inventing radical, insightful, original and valuable solutions?

This is in no sense a call for mindless adulation of youth as the source of all wisdom. The young can be just as muddled and conventional as their elders. Rather, I am advocating a sharpened awareness of the capabilities that may be simmering behind an unpolished or uninhibited façade. The record of history—continuing to this very instant—testifies to the breakthrough thinking and

action of the young. You ignore them out of hand at your own peril.

Endnotes

1 The lack of women in this list is a product of an impromptu, informal survey of general people around me when I asked them to name a genius. Not one person mentioned Simone de Beauvoir, Joan of Arc, George Eliot, or any of the other many brilliant women scattered throughout Western history. Obviously this and the lack of non-Western geniuses are topics for a future article about the current lack of value of diversity. Interestingly, I frequently had to ask for further names because "Einstein" appears to be an automatic response to this question.[Return to Article](#)

2 Do not confuse the same methodology for the same solution. Organisations with a proven process of investigating and assessing issues are not providing the same solution to every problem.[Return to Article](#)

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