

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Young and Old

By Douglas E. Welch

It is a simple fact of life that the longer you remain in your high-tech career, the more likely it will be for you to work for people younger than yourself. This is true whether you are an old corporate hand with a new “up-and-coming” manager, or are working as an independent consultant for hip, new high-tech startup firms. This discrepancy in age, and other related issues, can lead to problems, unless you know how to recognize and avoid them.

Elder Statesman?

In the past, it seemed that I was working for clients and managers who were significantly older than I was, usually on the order of 20 to 30 years older. While I still continue to service quite a few clients who could be described as “seniors,” I am noticing that they are no longer in the majority. More and more frequently, I am dealing with people who are near to my age or younger. Due to the simple passage of time, I am on my way to becoming an “elder statesman” as others start and develop their high-tech careers.

Getting Older/Getting Younger

This change in the average age of my clients has required a few changes in the way I operate. When you are dealing with someone of your own age, or older, you are less intimidating to them. These clients have been around the block a few times professionally, and know if you are trying to push them in a particular direction. They have the savvy to speak their mind and challenge your suggestions.

Younger clients can often feel intimidated by an older consultant/IT worker, and may hide their issues with you and your work. Such behavior can often leave you feeling blindsided when they do finally air their complaints, or end your contract without due warning. None of us sets out to intimidate clients, but sometimes our work methods don’t take age differences into account.

The next time you start working with a new client, pay attention to your relative age difference. Be aware of the possible issues that can arise. Do you need to approach training in a different way? Do you need to develop a less confrontational style? Do you need to develop ways of making the client feel comfortable working with you? Whatever the case, being aware of the issues can prevent

them from becoming insurmountable problems later.

Education

Another related issue that can sometimes arise when working with a client is differences between your levels of education. Most of you, as high-tech workers, have completed at least a bachelor’s degree in some field, even if it wasn’t in computer science. Some of you may hold even more advanced degrees. This can be intimidating to clients if they began their careers without going to college. Don’t make a habit of flaunting your collegiate affiliation if you are unsure of your client’s history. While most people are comfortable with their educational choices, others can be resentful, especially if they feel you are using your education to feel superior. Such behavior can doom your relationship before it ever gets off the ground.

The same issues can also arise with people you are supporting. Perhaps you and your client get along fabulously, sharing old college stories and such, but the staff members are unhappy with your work. Remember—while the client pays your salary, the staff can have a dramatic effect on whether your contract continues. Be sensitive to everyone you work with, not just your client.

Values

Finally, depending on the age of your clients, you may have different ideas about work. Older clients can favor “nose-to-the-grindstone” work patterns, while younger clients might want to concentrate on gradually building their workers’ computer use. You will need to carefully discover which values are most important to your clients, and how you can best match them. Age is only one factor in this equation, but can often be a good starting point.

You never seem to age gradually over time, but instead see time advance in leaps and bounds. Suddenly you are no longer the new kid in town, just starting your career. Instead, you find yourself having more in common with your clients than the young team that they manage. Your goal is to recognize the issues that can arise as you get older, and gradually change your high-tech career to match your growing age and experience. □

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