

Globe Careers



**Rules to
win the
networking
game**

**CONSULTANT
TIM CORK'S
POINTERS, C5**

What's Inside

PROBLEM SOLVING

How do you deal with a rude client? **C2**

ETHICS 101

A manager's dilemma: Writing a reference letter for a terminated employee **C2**

MANAGING BOOKS

A trivia lover's delight about famous brand names **C6**

THE WAY WE ARE

The seventh-inning stretch before spring **C6**

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WORKPLACE TRENDS

Generation swap: Baby boomers face baby bosses

More older employees find themselves working for younger managers. And the switch of power raises new kinds of friction, **RANDY RAY** writes

From the moment he was promoted to manage employees two decades his senior, things turned from collegial to cold for a 28-year-old marketing director at a British Columbia food processing company.

Fellow employees in their mid-40s and early 50s, suddenly turned into underlings, scrutinized his every move. Conversations that had once been open and friendly turned icy.

He, in turn, was reluctant to comment on his subordinates' performances for fear of stirring the pot.

"I got the job over people who were my peers, who had mentored me when I first came to the company, and they were not immediately accepting of me in this new role," recalls the man, who won't be named to avoid reigniting the tensions among some of the older employees who still work for him.

"People were walking on eggshells. [They] wondered what has this guy got that I don't have."

It's a question that many older workers might be asking as they see fresher faces being moved into the boss's chair. The issues surrounding younger bosses supervising older workers are a focal point of the current movie *In Good Company*, where a 26-year-old played by Topher Grace is parachuted into a senior role over a 51-year-old portrayed by Dennis Quaid.

But you don't need to go to the movies to see such a situation in ac-

tion. More and more, age does not mark seniority as a variety of factors converge to change the generational hierarchy.

With boomers aging, more employers are opting for youth over experience in grooming managers to replace veteran bosses on the cusp of retirement, human resource experts say.

Younger people are 'in shorter supply, they have more bargaining power and they can negotiate higher salaries. That moves them up the hierarchy faster than in the past.'

"Succession planning has become an issue with the large number of older workers who are soon to leave the work force," says Linda Duxbury, a professor at the Sprott School of Business at Carleton University. Companies are trying to ensure "who will be their managers five to 10 years from now, so they go with a young person."

Organizations operating in a global marketplace are also seeking many skills, especially technological, lacking in many older workers, says Lynn Lochbihler, a senior partner with Hamilton-based consult-

ing firm HR-Fusion Inc.

Ironically, a decline in the post-boomer birth rate has actually drained the pool of men and women in their 20s and early 30s who have the potential to manage, says University of Toronto economics professor and demographer David Foot, author of the bestselling *Boom, Bust & Echo*.

But because younger workers are "in shorter supply, they have more bargaining power and they can negotiate higher salaries. That moves them up the hierarchy faster than in the past," Prof. Foot says.

The generational switch of power is raising new kinds of friction, experts say.

Many older workers feel threatened and resentful when a fresh-faced boss arrives because they were raised in a hierarchical structure under which 10 to 15 years on the job was usually a ticket to a promotion, says Giselle Kovary, a managing partner of Toronto-based consulting firm n-gen People Performance Inc.

Young people, on the other hand, see nothing untoward in their quick ascent to managerial posts because, in their view, promotions should be tied solely to performance, Ms. Kovary says. Often, they are blind to an organization's politics, the resentment they might stir among older people and the need to keep veteran staff in the loop.

"They don't buy into the hierarchy at a company. . . They don't buy into waiting for a management job. Their feeling is: 'If I can do the job, I should be able to get the job.'" That has more companies using competency, rather than hierarchy, as the gauge for promotions, says Ms. Kovary, whose firm offers training and consulting services to help employers bridge generational gaps.



BRIAN GABLE/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The consequences can be disastrous for both younger bosses and older employees, especially if an up-and-comer is promoted at the expense of a more seasoned colleague, or an older person is demoted because of a merger or takeover, and replaced by young blood.

Older workers may feel unwanted and abandoned, Ms. Lochbihler

says. "They'll become miserable at work and their productivity could drop."

And those who feel hard done by may not go out of their way to help a new manager adjust, making life miserable for the boss, Prof. Duxbury adds.

As the young B.C. manager discovered, receiving the cold shoul-

der on the job can foster considerable tension.

Older workers may become so unhappy that they look for ways to leave, making the young boss's job doubly hard because years of experience go out the door, Prof. Duxbury adds.

See AGE on page C9