



WORLD OF WORK SERIES

INSIGHTS INTO THE EVOLVING WORLD OF WORK



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The young boss-old subordinate relationship



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In an all-pervasive hierarchical and conventional corporate culture, how do older professionals take to younger bosses? Is it an amicable working arrangement? Do the work ethos match? And most importantly, is the power equation perceived as fair? What we found was that while, on the face of it, flipping the generation convention is acceptable it is not exactly a match made in heaven.

A third of the world's employed professionals work for younger bosses. A globalized business environment has disrupted the ways work gets done. The constant disruption – and technology drives much of this – and the increasingly critical role of technology itself have made young leadership an imperative. This is good news for the younger generation, while the older generation is faced with the stark reality of a shrinking professional shelf life and – possibly – age-based discrimination. How much of a virtue is it for a boss to be young?

“In step with the times,” says General Manager – Operations, an ecommerce start up company “businesses need to adapt to global reality. Young bosses mean speed, agility and innovation.” She opines that professionals in their late 30s and early 40s are the exact age to be playing the role of a CEO.

So, what does it mean to be on the other side of the divide? The conservative middle-aged employee is not amused. It is estimated that about 80% of Indian professionals who have more than 20 years experience do not wish to report to a younger boss. “More often, young managers merely bring aggression and raw energy to the table. These do not necessarily translate into business growth. Business scenarios vary, and young leaders are needed more in entirely new domains than in mature industries where substantial experience is a prerequisite”, says a Senior Program Manager at an NGO.

Mere bluster and raw energy need not necessarily translate into business growth. Business scenarios vary, and young leaders are needed in entirely new domains. In mature industries, however, substantial experience is a prerequisite

“Lack of experience could lead one to fly blind and hope to get lucky”, according to Director – Delivery Quality, at a global auto major’s IT outsourced development center. “Having put in a number of years does not automatically guarantee success. But not having requisite experience would be a terrible shortcoming for a leader.” He strongly feels that an experienced leader is better capable of handling complexity, ambiguity, people and organizational transformation – factors managers need to address in a globalized business context.

The sentiment is palpable among some of the young too. An agent in a Securities trading brokerage firm believes that the boss needs to be substantially experienced to command respect. “The authority and maturity come with experience. I, or my equally experienced peers, may have the gumption to step into a senior leader’s role but we would not have the wisdom and foresight to face the kind of situations a more experienced professional would sail through.” As per him, 4 years in the financial services sector is just not enough for him to take on the role of a manager.

But there are indeed those with both gumption and intellect. The brave new employee is raring to take on mantles a much older colleague thinks twice before committing to. “If I were called upon to deliver on a business unit P & L responsibility I would gladly accept. And not just that – I would innovate my way up the career path – my lack of experience is irrelevant here”, Sales Engineer with a mid-sized industrial automation company says. The brash, young, brigade puts ability to think out of the box and innovation above inadequacies such as industry wisdom, technical knowledge and best practices.

If I were called upon to deliver on a business unit P & L responsibility I would gladly accept. And not just that – I would innovate my way up the growth chart for the business unit.

Do sparks fly often due to the generation gap? “Absolutely”, says Coordinator–Finance at a hotel management group. “There are differences of opinion simmering between the generations. And it all comes to boil at crucial moments of a company’s journey.” He believes though, that such occurrences are entirely preventable, and that the onus is on the

boss. “The friction is inevitable. But the dust must settle within a short period of time, or else it will all accumulate and hit the fan.”

A Managing Partner at a contract manufacturing company has this to say, “Meritocracy and objectivity will foster healthy working relationships. But the young manager needs to pay attention to employee sentiment as well. S/he should, for instance, be cautious about criticizing older subordinates. Always criticize in private and do not let it be perceived as arrogance.”

How does the organization’s culture get affected? Who would shape it – the young or the old? Human Resources Head at a global real estate services firm believes that the younger, energetic culture rules. “The power equation, often, determines the culture. But I would think energy can never be concealed,

and so even in an organization with staid people at the top the culture could would be determined by the young if they are in considerable numbers.” It seems, therefore, that a young workforce –and not just young leaders – shapes the culture for the better. More agility, creativity and actionability for the buck, if you please.

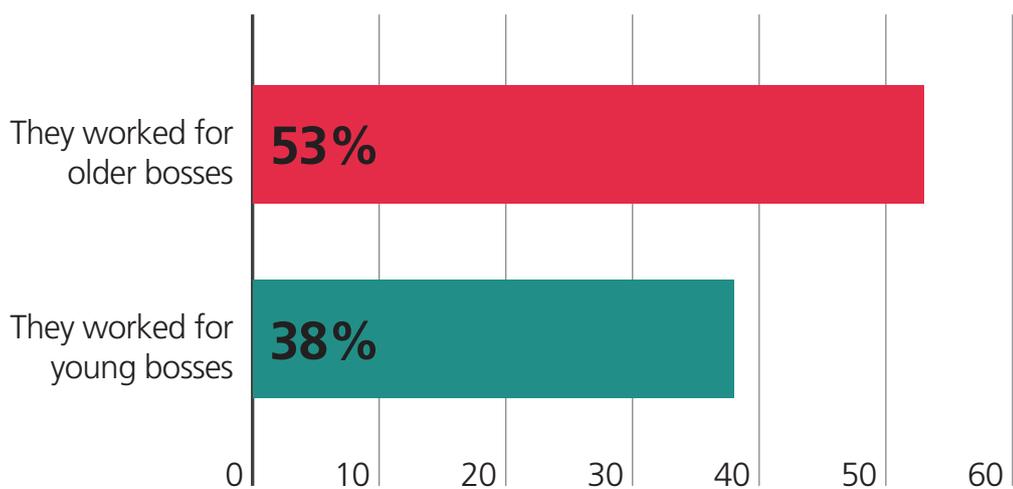
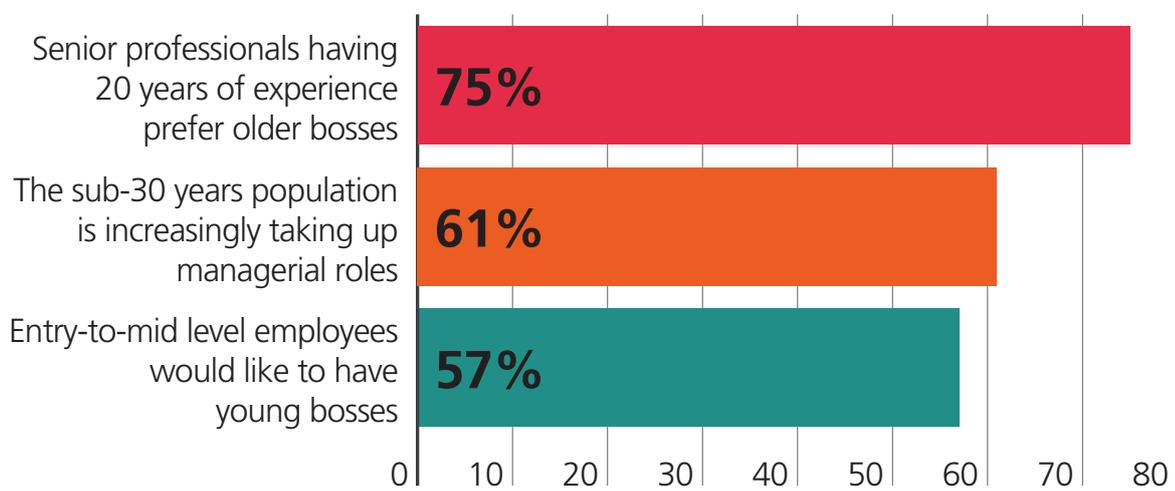
Would a bias for young leaders or, for that matter a young workforce, amount to discrimination? “It certainly does”, an Organizational Development Specialist, says. “I have seen many professionals in their 50s and 60s that are sprightlier and more innovative than youngsters. It is naïve to generalize that youth means energy and innovation. Perhaps, they are slow on the uptake as far as new technologies are concerned. But when they get down to business – or even ideation – these professionals win hands down.” Plus, they combine this with wisdom, and industry and domain thumbrules, she says.

“Choosing people based on age, sex or ethnicity is discriminatory. This reality will simmer in the minds of the victims – the older professionals – and is bound to create friction in the organization. The organization ends up snubbing the voices of the older employees and starts getting a reputation for being unfair. Diversity is always a good policy. It brings differently abled minds and experiences together. Businesses can only benefit from better diversity on most, if not all counts”, opines a senior professional working in the Travel and Tourism industry.

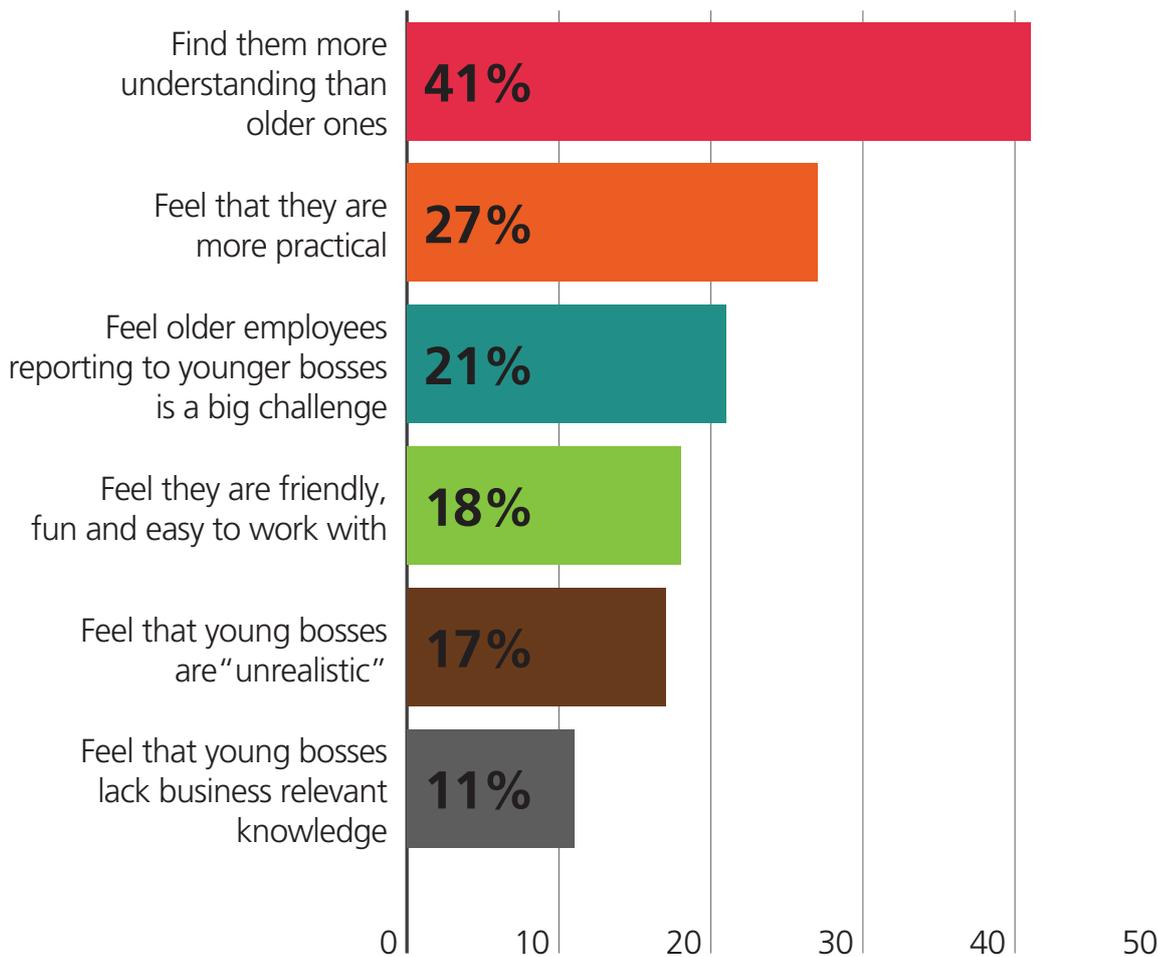
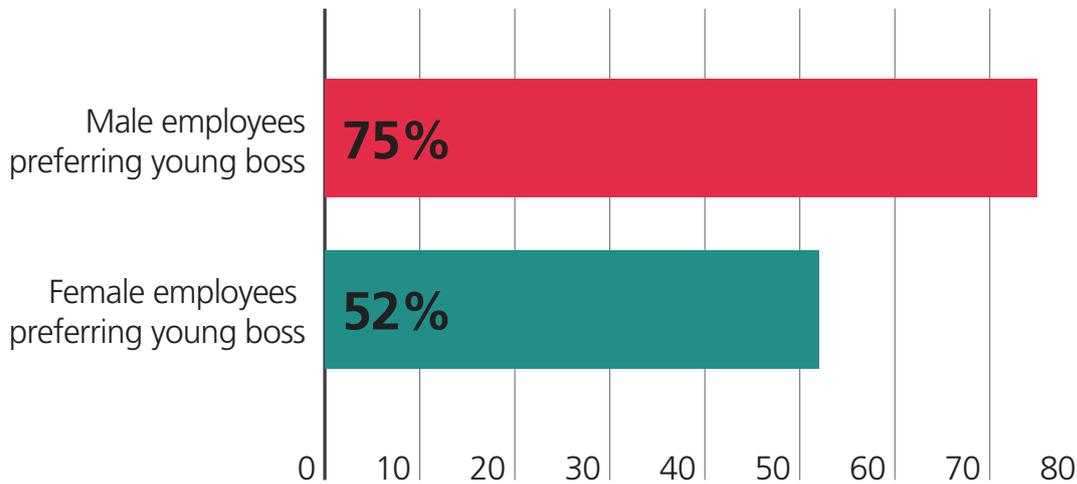
In all, it looks like industry is hung up on young leadership talent with a belief that such leadership drives business value through agility and innovation. But somewhere, the voices of equally – if not better – capable older professionals is not being heard enough.

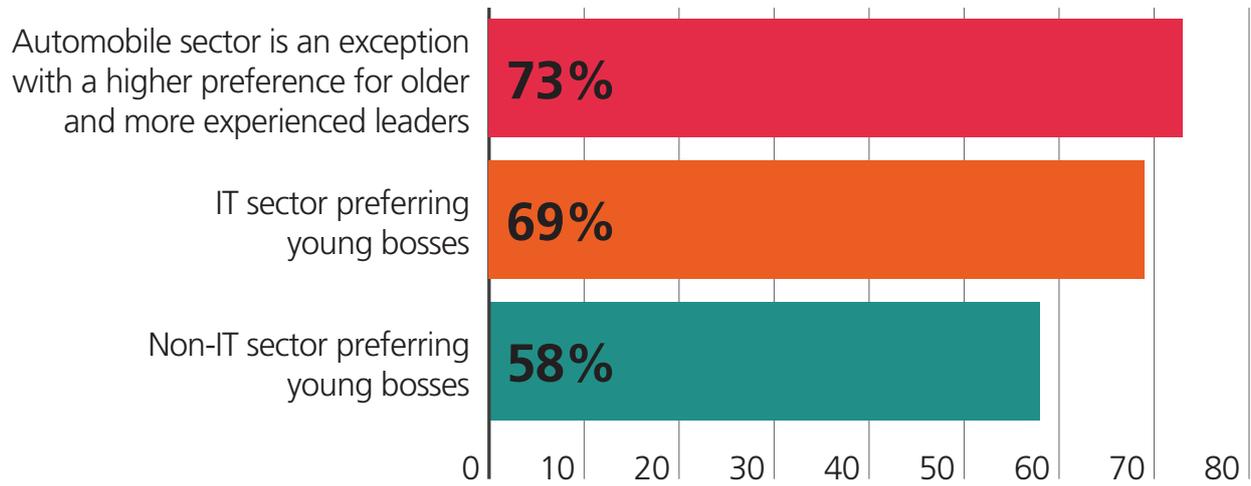
Statistics

Overall



Startup Ratings





Annexure

1

How is a young boss-old subordinate scenario seen by businesses worldwide?

General Manager Operations - E-Commerce

Young bosses mean speed, agility and innovation. opines that professionals in their late 30s and early 40s are the exact age to be playing the role of a CEO.

2

Is significant amount of experience a prerequisite to rise to leadership?

Senior Program Manager - NGO

80% of Indian professionals who have more than 20 years experience do not wish to report to a younger boss. More often, young managers merely bring aggression and raw energy to the table. These do not necessarily translate into business growth Business scenarios vary, and young leaders are needed more in entirely new domains than in mature industries where substantial experience is a prerequisite.

Director – Delivery Quality - IT

Having put in a number of years does not automatically guarantee success. But not having requisite experience would be a terrible shortcoming for a leader. He strongly feels that an experienced leader is better capable of handling complexity, ambiguity, people and organizational transformation – factors managers need to address in a globalized business context.

Agent

The authority and maturity come with experience. I, or my equally experienced peers, may have the gumption to step into a senior leader's role but we would not have the wisdom and foresight to face the kind of situations a more experienced professional would sail through.

Sales Engineer - Industrial Manufacturing

If I were called upon to deliver on a business unit P & L responsibility I would gladly accept. And not just that – I would innovate my way up the career path – my lack of experience is irrelevant here.

3 Does the generation gap cause friction?

Coordinator–Finance - Hospitality

There are differences of opinion simmering between the generations. And it all comes to boil at crucial moments of a company's journey. That such occurrences are entirely preventable, and that the onus is on the boss. The friction is inevitable. But the dust must settle within a short period of time, or else it will all accumulate and hit the fan.

4 What is the effect on the boss-subordinate relationship?

Managing Partner - Manufacturing

Meritocracy and objectivity will foster healthy working relationships. But the young manager needs to pay attention to employee sentiment as well. S/he should, for instance, be cautious about criticizing older subordinates. Always criticize in private and do not let it be perceived as arrogance.

5 Do older subordinates sabotage company culture, by virtue of their being in the organization for a long period of time?

Human Resources Head - Real Estate

The power equation, often, determines the culture. But I would think energy can never be concealed, and so even in an organization with staid people at the top the culture would be determined by the young if they are in considerable numbers. It seems, therefore, that a young workforce –and not just young leaders – shapes the culture for the better. More agility, creativity and actionability for the buck, if you please

6

Would the bias for / against older subordinates in leadership roles amount to discrimination?

Organizational Development Specialist

I have seen many professionals in their 50s and 60s that are sprightlier and more innovative than youngsters. It is naïve to generalize that youth means energy and innovation. Perhaps, they are slow on the uptake as far as new technologies are concerned. But when they get down to business – or even ideation – these professionals win hands down. Plus, they combine this with wisdom, and industry and domain thumb rules.

Senior Professional - Tourism

Choosing people based on age, sex or ethnicity is discriminatory. This reality will simmer in the minds of the victims – the older professionals – and is bound to create friction in the organization. The organization ends up snubbing the voices of the older employees and starts getting a reputation for being unfair. Diversity is always a good policy. It brings differently abled minds and experiences together. Businesses can only benefit from better diversity on most, if not all counts.



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