



THE PURSUIT OF HAPPY-ISH

The millennial beard: why boomers need their younger counterparts. And vice versa

By Susanna Schrobsdorff

A FRIEND OF MINE, WHO'S A LITTLE OVER 50, MET WITH a big firm about a job recently. The good news was that they loved his ideas. But they said he would have to get someone else to present all his great ideas to clients. In other words, someone who can wear a hoodie to work without irony. Like a business body double. A millennial beard. That way, the company could keep looking young while still benefiting from his deep knowledge of the business and, well, human nature.

The concept isn't as unfair as it sounds. As a late boomer, I have high hopes for this arrangement. We are increasingly codependent generations. Millennials need boomers and older Gen X-ers so they know what to improve on. And we need millennials to get our ideas across. Just ask anyone who's tried pitching a startup to investors without a 20-something on her team. Even middle-aged people don't trust anyone over 30. That's why 40- and 50-somethings fall all over themselves in meetings to show who can most enthusiastically agree with a millennial's idea.

It's a little desperate, our bid for relevance by association. But we oldsters feel insecure without a 20-something as backup, especially when it comes to anything involving the word *content*. Or Snapchat. Or any kind of sharing that doesn't involve food or money. More important, millennials are now the largest, hardest-working sector of the workforce and the most desirable market for most businesses, and we don't want them to turn on us.

At Google, where the median employee age is about 29, the company has a support group for people over 40 called Greyglers. In the blurb about Greyglers, the company notes that they hope to promote "age diversity awareness" at Google and foster the success of their "elders." Yes, middle age is now a special-interest group. This is perhaps why 28-year-old tech gurus fret about losing their jobs to college interns who are cheaper and more current. It's also why Botox is booming in the Valley among some older engineers.

CLOSELY RELATED IS a new corporate trend called "reverse mentorship." That's when millennials take older employees under their wing to teach them how most corporate revenue problems can be solved with a few social-media tricks, and why you shouldn't ever leave voice mails for anyone.

Nonetheless, I'm all for millennial mentors. (And I agree about voice mail.) I used to run TIME's editorial-technology department, back when people used dial-up modems. Since then I've learned to make deals in advance with a millennial to ensure support before I suggest anything vaguely technical in a meeting. You need a millennial front person for an idea to succeed. Partly because when they believe in something, they will put in 7,000 thankless hours to make it happen. Plus, life is so much better when it's infused with the energy



of people who aren't hobbled by the memory of what didn't work "the last time we tried that." Turns out, tech knowledge is a lot like online celebrity. It's highly perishable.

AND THAT'S WHERE WE BOOMERS can come in handy for millennials. We've already done all that reckoning. We learned a long time ago that there is always someone younger, thinner and more digital waiting right behind you.

Remember, back in the 20th century, we were the smartest kids in the room. But then we had kids ourselves, and the stakes got higher when it came to careers and relationships. We couldn't just keep trading up or moving on; we had to learn to hold on instead. And work started bleeding into our nights and weekends, thanks to the very technology that everyone still struggles to keep ahead of now. Time was no longer limitless, and it stretched thin faster than we expected.

This new generation will face all that soon enough. Even Mark Zuckerberg, who famously said that "young people are just smarter," might not feel so smart now that his first child has arrived. Babies can do that. Family is the one variable you can't control for. You can't scrap them for a new version. There's no A/B testing or product road map, and the people in your life will be unfailingly unpredictable. You'll often decide to choose their happiness over your ambitions. And they will get sick or die when you don't expect it.

Life is inherently disruptive. You just have to adapt. There's no secret hack, no work-around, no pro tip for that. Except maybe this: to manage the personal hurricanes that will blow your way, you'll need aid and comfort from the people where you work. And that's when a little intergenerational codependence can be a very good thing. □

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