

Open in app ↗



Search

Write

Image by [Monkey Business Images](#) on [Shutterstock](#)

★ Member-only story

# Older Employees and Younger Managers

Age Is a State of Mind—Until You're Reporting To Someone Half Your Age



Kenneth Kousen

Published in The Pragmatic Programmers · 9 min read · Sep 17, 2021



325



5



**Connect with us.** *Want to hear what's new at The Pragmatic Bookshelf? Sign up for our newsletter. You'll be the first to know about author speaking*

*engagements, books in beta, new books in print, and promo codes that give you discounts of up to 40%.*

The recent Stack Overflow survey for 2021 brought home a demographic fact of life in the IT world: the community is very, very young.

#### Stack Overflow Developer Survey 2021

The United States and India continue to provide the highest volume of survey responses, followed by Germany and UKI (UK...

[insights.stackoverflow.com](https://insights.stackoverflow.com)

Take a look at the drop that occurs after age 44. If you total the age 45 and above percentages, you get almost 89.94 percent. In other words, nearly 90 percent of all software developers are younger than 45. That's a lot of (relatively) young people.

In Silicon Valley, the situation is arguably even more extreme. According to the settlement of a recent age discrimination lawsuit against Google, the median age there in 2017 was only 28, which is about a decade younger than the median age of all US workers.

That means if you stay in IT long enough, you'll probably be reporting to someone younger (sometimes significantly younger) than you are. It's not just IT, however. As the baby boomer generation ages, those who stay in the workforce are more and more likely to experience working for a younger boss. Even millennials (born between 1981 and 1995) could soon be working for their peers or younger. One day you may wake up and find some young, wet behind the ears manager is writing your performance reviews and making decisions about your career.

This article is part of a series of posts about managing your manager, based on the book *Help Your Boss Help You*.

## Bond: Art Imitates Life

Heck, it's already happened to James Bond. In the movie *Skyfall*, there's a scene between Bond and the new head of Q branch, who, as Bond says, "still has spots."

As the dialog goes:

*Q: Age is no guarantee of efficiency.*

*Bond: And youth is no guarantee of innovation.*

The producers of the movie clearly were looking for a different relationship than Bond had with John Cleese. Fortunately, the two of them manage (ha!) to get along.

An age gap provides special challenges. How do you handle it when the person with the most impact on your career is someone you're tempted to ask to get off your lawn?

Building the relationship requires both sides to understand that older workers really are different and bring different assets (and liabilities) to the job.

## Benefits of Mature Workers

From the manager's perspective, older workers bring certain benefits, like institutional knowledge and consistency.

### Institutional Knowledge

*Older workers have institutional knowledge that can save you from making mistakes.*

An experienced employee can tell you *why* systems were put together a particular way, rather than just how. Processes and procedures don't spring into being fully formed. They evolve based on whatever forces were relevant at the time. An older, long-time employee can help managers understand what drove a solution in a particular direction, which can be very important when it comes time to replace those systems.

### Consistency

*Older employees tend to be more consistent than younger ones.*

Having been around a long time, older employees have seen how repeated, dedicated effort accumulates over time. Mature adults tend to appreciate how important consistent effort and putting in the hours is to future successes.

## Challenges for Younger Managers

On the other hand, older, established personalities have their own quirks. For example, while *work-life balance* is a concern for young people, but it is a critical fact of life for older employees.

### Work-Life Balance

When I was in my 20s, I would have been excited hearing that the median age at Google was only 28, because that implied to me that I could be very young and still get respect and big opportunities. Now I look at a statistic like that as a serious red flag. With the caveat that I've never worked there, so I don't really know, a median age that low implies to me that almost no one advances at Google. Instead, they hire young people straight out of school and grind them into dust, so that one way or another they leave within a few years. Then Google hires another batch and repeats the process. A young median age implies to me that work-life balance is non-existent. Rather, the company likely expects you to both live and work there all the time, and provides essential services like meals and laundry.

For enough money, I might have considered that arrangement at age 22, when I didn't have a life anyway. I wouldn't have liked it, but if you paid me

enough I probably would have gone along. As I got older, got married, and had a child, not to mention acquired interests outside of work, my priorities changed. Now I would never agree to such an imbalance. As the cliché goes, life is too short to spend it all at the office.

## Curmudgeon Mode



Photo by [Andre Hunter](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Another challenge provided by older workers is their tendency to become *curmudgeons*. A curmudgeon can be summarized by the expression, “seen it all; done it all; not impressed.” Older developers know that there’s nothing new under the sun, and each generation rediscovers the advances made by their elders, just in a new form.

As a personal example, I spent four long years reporting to an old Lisp programmer\*. He could not physically stop himself from pointing out that for each new technology I was learning, Lisp had already implemented it many years ago. The worst part, of course, was that he was usually right.

\*For those pedantic older developers among us, I mean LISP. It really is okay, however, to use mixed case these days.

Curmudgeon mode is a problem if the senior employee becomes too negative, dismissing each new technology out of hand. Ask them for stories about the older technology, including a comparison of the old way to the new version. If you can get people to engage, that's half the battle.

## Older Employees Are Still Capable

As I've gotten older, I've come to realize an interesting fact:

*Older employees can do anything younger ones can do, just not as often and for not as long.*

You see this phenomenon in sports all the time. In baseball, a so-called *wily veteran* can pitch their way out of a jam but probably can't go seven or eight innings anymore. An experienced player understands the game better, so they're better able to anticipate developments and react accordingly. They compensate for the fact they're not physically what they used to be by being in the right place at the right time on a regular basis.

Older workers have to judge when and how to use their energy and other assets to their best advantage. For those days when older workers lag on energy, established consistency will see them through.

## Advice For Older Workers

When meeting young co-workers or managers, it goes a long way to reassure them your knowledge is still current. Don't insist on doing things the way you did years ago, because everything was so much better back then — it really wasn't. Don't appear to value past advances over newer ones. When you take the other person seriously and assure them you won't criticize everything new they recommend, you can work together successfully.

With younger managers, this approach will assure them you are not a curmudgeon (at least not yet), and that you will support their decisions. Make it clear you are not resentful, nor are you after their job. The manager's job is different, not better or worse, and though we tend to view age and advancement as going together, that's not necessarily true.





Photo by [Bimo Luki](#) on [Unsplash](#)

There's another new issue, however, that you may not expect: typical societal relationships with age differences. I remember the first time it hit me was in a restaurant. My server was very young.

I questioned how long the meal was taking to arrive — the person cringed like they'd been reprimanded.

I never blame a server for issues with the kitchen, but there was something more going on. It dawned on me that maybe the server wasn't seeing me as a normal customer — I was more like a parental figure expressing disapproval.

When dealing with a much younger manager, understanding that perspective is very important. Many work relationships get overlaid with feelings derived from family, whether you want them to or not. A young manager may see older workers as being judgemental or watching everything they do, ready to criticize at a moment's notice.

Keep in mind that an extra smile goes a long way — it shows people that you value them. While true for any boss/employee relationship, in one where your manager is younger, the corresponding appreciation may be substantial. The result can be more than a typical working relationship, and one that can affect your whole life.

### **The Promise of a Warm, Mentoring Relationship**

That brings up another way the relationship can work. Young managers often fear that older, experienced employees are going to undercut their authority or act as obstacles to progress. Though complaining about the job is a right and privilege that goes back at least to the Babylonians, nobody wants to work with a curmudgeon.

If instead, you can establish that you're there to help rather than cause problems, all those advantages provided by older workers become valuable. The young manager may eventually ask your advice (privately) about what to do or how to go about leading the team in new directions, or even about big events in their lives. Make it clear you're not trying to take their job and that you're willing to abide by their decisions, and you can build a warm, mentoring relationship that works well for both sides.

Older employees working for younger managers can be a challenge. Each side worries they won't be taken seriously by the other. Each side doubts the other understands the other's entire generation. But we can learn to work

together, and the resulting relationships can become among the most valuable each side will ever have.

Through October 31, 2021 you can use promo code **boss\_35** to save 35% on the ebook version of *Help Your Boss Help You* by Ken Kousen, published by *The Pragmatic Bookshelf*. Promo codes are not valid on prior purchases.

### Help Your Boss Help You

Develop more productive habits in dealing with your manager. As a professional in the business world, you care about...

[pragprog.com](https://pragprog.com)

## More Wisdom From Help Your Boss Help You

If you enjoyed this article, you may also enjoy the following articles, which are based on the concepts from *Help Your Boss Help You* by Ken Kousen:

### The Two Messages To Give Your Manager

Think About These Whenever You Interact with Your Boss

[medium.com](https://medium.com)

### When Your Boss Is a Micromanager