

How getting the sack can actually turn out to be a good thing

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Can adland solve its age problem?

It's an issue that just won't go away. Can the ad industry find a place for experience, John Tylee asks

LIVE ISSUE

As a measure of the depth of frustration, anger and bitterness felt by adland's forty- and fiftysomethings (those who still have a job, that is), the forum running on Brand Republic would be hard to beat. It's entitled "The elephant in the room", although "The spectre at the feast" might be more appropriate.

The bloggers discuss their situations with a mixture of grim humour ("I can go to the bathroom by myself and everything"), resentment ("is there anywhere for a copywriter in their forties? What about an art director in their fifties? With awards, too") and rage ("How many people in their forties and fifties have you hired lately, Bartle Bogle Hegarty? What about you, Saatchi & Saatchi?").

Such is the strength of feeling that they have become the industry's pariahs, some are even led to compare the business with 50s Hollywood, when directors black-listed during the McCarthy witch hunts were forced to adopt pseudonyms in order to work. "I've stopped putting my date of birth on the CV," one admits.

The latest *IPA Census* reinforces the fears of mature staffers. It shows



Grey power... can the ad industry afford to ignore society's demographics?

that almost half of the industry's permanent workforce is 30 or under. Just one employee in every 25 is over 50. In media agencies, 60 per cent of staff are under 30.

Contrast that with the most recent UK census, which reveals that there are now more people over 60 in Britain than there are under 16, and the scale of the disconnect between the industry demographic and society becomes apparent.

The disgruntlement of the bloggers focuses on what they regard as ineffective age discrimination laws and the disinterest in older job-seekers shown by recruitment con-

sultants. "Why haven't any headhunters bothered to reply to this very important topic," one says.

Perhaps the bigger question, though, is whether or not the bloggers are letting their emotions get in the way of reality and are just following Dylan Thomas' exhortation to "rage, rage against the dying of the light".

Certainly, the forum's collective mood is cynicism. "To ensure you still have a job in advertising when you're 40 or over, start your own agency," one contributor advises. "Otherwise, face up to reality and become a driving instructor."

How much the disenchantment is justified is an open question. Industry employment experts suggest advertising isn't ageist. It's simply that cash-strapped agencies can't sustain high levels of older staff because they cost too much money.

One answer could be for agencies to switch the best of their mature staff to consultancy roles, harnessing their talents as and when they need them. "Legally, it's tricky, but not impossible," Belinda Kent-Lemon, the IPA's human resources consultant, says.

However, Lucy Owen, the Nabs chief executive, counsels caution. "We'll always try to get mature people back in the business full time if we possibly can," she says. "We don't suggest freelancing because it's a tough market and so competitive."

So is there any hope for anybody born before Aretha Franklin's *Respect* was released to command it when looking for a new agency job? It depends. "Anyone in their forties who has been a successful department head will always be in demand," Owen says. "It's those who've not worked at that level who might need to consider getting retrained for something else."

Got a view?

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Former creative chief



Steve Harrison, former worldwide creative director, Wunderman

"We need to regain respect for the wisdom of experience. At present, it's scorned by an industry too lacking in confidence to resist the proponents of perpetual change.

"Young people coming into the industry have to be seen to be welcoming change in all its manifestations and reject continuity as if it's the answer to all needs.

"It's about time we remembered our rich heritage and embraced bodies such as the History of Advertising Trust. And we should follow the US by establishing an Advertising Hall of Fame.

"The legal, medical and financial professions lionise their elder statesmen. Why don't we?"

IPA HR expert



Belinda Kent-Lemon, human resources consultant, IPA; founder, Occam HR

"It isn't age discrimination, but salary discrimination. People become more expensive as they get older and more senior. So when agencies cut costs, they'll usually do so from the top.

"There are no easy answers given the financial structures of agencies and the fact that margins are tight. Perhaps they ought to encourage older staff to consider more flexible working to allow them to draw on their experience on specific projects.

"Older people can remain in the industry as long as they have the right attitude and don't think they can necessarily continue doing the sexy jobs they did when they were younger and cheaper."

Creative director



Rory Sutherland, vice-chairman, Ogilvy UK

"It's not really necessary to be up at 6am three times a week to fly to Frankfurt, but young agency people relish that kind of thing. Older ones find it tiring and are tired of appearing to be so busy but achieving so little.

"Also, there's a misunderstanding that creativity is the preserve of the young. That's by no means true. What's more, as the population as a whole gets older, so we need people in agencies who understand the changing markets.

"Agencies need to be more flexible when it comes to working patterns for older staff. The fact is that they're often more efficient than younger ones in terms of energy expended."

Agency chief



Andrew McGuinness, partner, Beattie McGuinness Bungay

"Working at the top of an agency is no different from working at the top of any company. You have to cope with a lot of pressure and you need incredible energy. So it's inevitable that such jobs will be filled mainly by younger managers.

"Nevertheless, there's still a place for mature people in client services, planning and creative because it's important that we get the right balance of experience and youth. We're moving in the right direction, but it will always be the case that advertising attracts a high proportion of young people.

"We worry that we're losing so much mature talent, but maybe it's because agencies produce people with very transferable skills who are capable of a wide range of jobs."

24 HOURS WITH...



Name Jonathan Burley

Job Executive creative director, Leo Burnett

Personal mantra

Have a rather lovely time...

Professional mission ...while delivering some rather lovely work

6.45am Catch sight of myself in the mirror on the way from bed to shower. Scream girlishly. Someone has stolen my eyes.

7.15am Smoke long cigarette. Wait for my black bus.

8.15am Have cleansing bacon and egg breakfast with Jim Bolton. Spend 90 minutes discussing today's workload on McDonald's. Get briefly sidetracked as we try to work out why characters in soap operas never talk about the telly they watched the night before.

10.00am Patrick, the loveable account buffoon on Oxfam, takes me through some shots that Rankin has taken for the 48-sheet campaign. He does this so that I can mention Rankin in my "24 Hours With..." and give myself some superficial creative credibility.

10.30am The strategic account review on Always. A very compelling presentation, and I am disappointed to find I have nothing facetious to say during the review.

12.00pm The Kellogg team presents to me some rather brilliant Nutri-Grain ideas, and I idly wonder how I can steal the credit from Billy Mawhinney, the CD. If I were a bigger man, I'd use physical force. Sadly, I have little upper-body strength and so have to let it go.

1.00pm Eat tepid sandwich. Cleanse my palate with a long cigarette.

1.30pm Wander around the department trying to meddle with as many projects as possible while acting the giddy goat. Can see the strain on the younger creatives' faces as they struggle to sustain corporate laughter.

2.30pm Discuss our new working process with Big John Hodges. I am very excited by this. The process, that is, not Big John; he has fists like hams and would beat the shit out of me if I made a pass at him.

4.30pm Have a lengthy and profitable conversation with Paul Lawson about new projects.

6.00pm Head into town to see the first edit of the new McDonald's "boom" spot.

7.00pm Pop round to see my beautiful godson, Rufus. His father has taught him to whisper "I love you, Uncle Jon", while staring into my eyes, which is a corrupt and manipulative thing to do. His father does indeed work in advertising.

12.30am Bed, and an unbelievably rude dream about someone I'm not at liberty to discuss.