

# SMALL Business Times

Reprinted from *Small Business Times*, May 10, 2002

## Wisdom of the elders

*In our youth-oriented culture, we neglect the treasures of experience*

By Jo Hawkins Donovan, for *Small Business Times*

**T**oday I heard about a highly respected business figure in her early '60s who is regularly calling herself a "has-been".

A man I know with one of the keenest business minds in our country is at home now, not in his office, out of the "loop," as they say, because age has separated him from agile young men in khakis and oxford shirts, cell-phones in hand who are wired in.

In our Midwestern city, and probably others like it, we are sitting around conference tables talking about how to stop the "brain-drain" of our young graduates, while a rich cache of wisdom and experience tucked inside graying heads around us is being gently — or rudely — nudged aside.

The changes that have occurred in the past, say, four decades, are remarkable. And maybe that's why people who haven't dived into them hands on, from the first computer to the wireless office of tomorrow, are considered "out of it", and cast aside. I've been called in by organizations to ease the transition of valued long-term employees they were terminating because these employees just couldn't catch on to the new technology fast enough.

My husband says — at least 50% in jest — "the Internet is a fad." Yet this husband, who retired several years ago, has become an informal business advisor to one of our daughters and now a growing number of her entrepreneur friends, as well.

I remember sitting at the feet of a family member and founder of a family business, my arm across his aging knee, as he told me, "Your word is your finest asset, protect it with all your might". Outdated advice from an old codger — God, I hope not. Pop, as I called him, was born in 1899 — "I'm always a year older than the year" he'd say. He saw the first automobiles, the first airplanes. He didn't live long enough to see the first computers — and I don't think that dilutes his advice. He brought his business out of the ashes of the Depression into an organization that provided income for generations to come. Would he not have helpful advice during this current economic squeeze?

In other cultures, including the bedrock of culture in this country, Native American tribes, the wisdom of the elders is held in high esteem. Yet our fast-forward culture is into youth, into shuttling our elders into special communities, assisted living, into irrelevance. Has

our collective attention span shrunk to the point that we cannot pause long enough to listen to those who may speak more slowly, with some hesitation, even with humility?

In the go-go '90s, we all met dot.com senior execs who were just brushing past age 30.

Even now, we aren't joking when we ask around the office if anyone knows a 12-year-old who might fix a computer glitch. I have enormous respect for thousands of "scary bright" young adults I've met. I have so much respect for the raw intelligence of children that I proposed - back when we were caught up in the Y2K panic — that we invite groups of second-graders all over the world to brainstorm solutions. I figured that after four hours in a room together, these young minds would come up with better and more creative answers than anyone else.

My 5-month-old grandson has already taught me some valuable lessons. We do want to be open to the fresh teachings of youth, and respectful that it evolves from a different culture than the one we lived in.

But that doesn't mean worship youth. That doesn't mean that we buy into the windstorm of propaganda in television commercials, those ads that would have us believe if we just take the right pharmaceuticals we can be water-skiing like teenagers when we're 90. And it doesn't mean that we discount the experience and wisdom at the other end of the spectrum, where the population is soon going to be growing at an unprecedented rate.

What we can do is respect varying rhythms of life. We can slow the pace enough to glean some knowledge from our elders. We can lift the phone and call that retired executive and ask for advice. We can free ourselves from the judging voice in our heads. And the elders? Well, they can wait to be invited to advise, and can drop some language that isn't helping, like "Back in my day here's how we did it." And perhaps as a culture, we can ponder forming elder councils to enrich our lives.

Jo Hawkins Donovan has a coaching and psychotherapy firm in Milwaukee, and can be reached at 414-271-5848 or [jo@hawkinsdonovan.com](mailto:jo@hawkinsdonovan.com). The firm's Web site is [www.hawkinsdonovan.com](http://www.hawkinsdonovan.com). Hawkins Donovan will respond to your questions in this column. Her column appears in every other issue of SBT.

