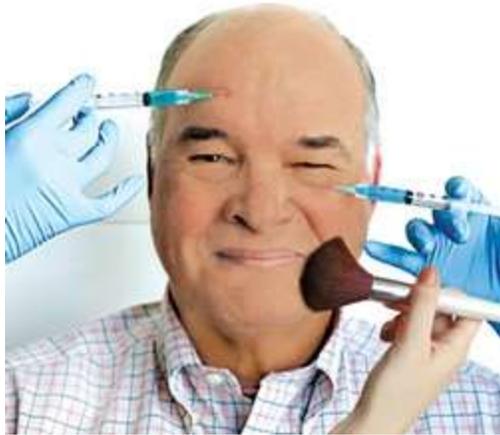


# Face Time: Eternal Youth Has Become a Growth Industry in Silicon Valley

By **Rachel Swan** @rachelswan Tuesday, Aug 12 2014

**Comments (2)**



PHOTOGRAPH BY MIKE KOOZMIN

The students of Timothy Draper's University of Heroes shuffle into a conference room, khaki shorts swishing against their knees, flip-flops clacking against the carpeted floor. One by one they take their seats and crack open their laptops, training their eyes on Facebook home pages or psychedelic screen savers. An air conditioner whirs somewhere in the rafters. A man in chinos stands before them.

The man is Steve Westly, former state controller, prominent venture capitalist, 57-year-old baron of Silicon Valley. He smiles at the group with all the sheepishness of a student preparing for show-and-tell. He promises to be brief.

"People your age are changing the world," Westly tells the students, providing his own list of great historical innovators: Napoleon, Jesus, Zuckerberg, Larry, Sergey. "It's almost never people my age," he adds.

Students at Draper University — a private, residential tech boot camp launched by venture capitalist Timothy Draper, in what was formerly San Mateo's Benjamin Franklin Hotel — have already embraced Westly's words as a credo. They inhabit a world where success and greatness seem to hover within arm's reach. A small handful of those who complete the six-week, \$9,500 residential program might get a chance to join Draper's business incubator; an even smaller handful might eventually get desks at an

accelerator run by Draper's son, Adam. It's a different kind of meritocracy than Westly braved, pursuing an MBA at Stanford in the early '80s. At Draper University, heroism is merchandised, rather than earned. A 20-year-old with bright eyes and deep pockets (or a parent who can front the tuition) has no reason to think he won't be the next big thing.

This is the dogma that glues Silicon Valley together. Young employees are plucked out of high school, college-aged interns trade their frat houses and dorm rooms for luxurious corporate housing. Twenty-seven-year-old CEOs inspire their workers with snappy jingles about moving fast and breaking things. Entrepreneurs pitch their business plans in slangy, tech-oriented patois.

Gone are the days of the "company man" who spends 30 years ascending the ranks in a single corporation. Having an Ivy League pedigree and a Brooks Brothers suit is no longer as important.

"Let's face it: The days of the 'gold watch' are over," 25-year-old writer David Burstein says. "The average millennial is expected to have several jobs by the time he turns 38."

Yet if constant change is the new normal, then older workers have a much harder time keeping up. The Steve Westlys of the world are fading into management positions. Older engineers are staying on the back-end, working on system administration or architecture, rather than serving as the driving force of a company.

"If you lost your job, it might be hard to find something similar," a former Google contractor says, noting that an older engineer might have to settle for something with a lower salary, or even switch fields. The contractor says he knows a man who graduated from Western New England University in the 1970s with a degree in the somewhat archaic field of time-motion engineering. That engineer wound up working at Walmart.

Those who do worm their way into the Valley workforce often have a rough adjustment. The former contractor, who is in his 40s, says he was often the oldest person commuting from San Francisco to Mountain View on a Google bus. And he adhered to a different schedule: Wake up at 4:50 a.m., get out the door by 6:20, catch the first coach home at 4:30 p.m. to be home for a family supper. He was one of the few people who didn't take advantage of the free campus gyms or gourmet cafeteria dinners or on-site showers. He couldn't hew to a live-at-work lifestyle.

And compared to other middle-aged workers, he had it easy.

In a lawsuit filed in San Francisco Superior Court in July, former Twitter employee Peter H. Taylor claims he was canned because of his age, despite performing his duties in "an exemplary manner." Taylor, who was 57 at the time of his termination in September of last year, says his supervisor made at least one derogatory remark about his age, and that the company refused to accommodate his disabilities following a bout with kidney stones. He says he was ultimately replaced by several employees in their 20s and 30s. A Twitter spokesman says the lawsuit is without merit and that the company will "vigorously" defend itself.

The case is not without precedent. Computer scientist Brian Reid lobbed a similar complaint against Google in 2004, claiming co-workers called him an "old man" and an "old fuddy-duddy," and routinely told him he was not a "cultural fit" for the company. Reid was 54 at the time he filed the complaint; he settled for an undisclosed amount of money.

What is surprising, perhaps, is that a 57-year-old man was employed at Twitter at all. "Look, Twitter has no 50-year-old employees," the former Google contractor says, smirking. "By the time these [Silicon Valley] engineers are in their 40s, they're old — they have houses, boats, stock options, mistresses. They drive to work in Chevy Volts."

There's definitely a swath of Valley nouveau riche who reap millions in their 20s and 30s, and who are able to cash out and retire by age 40. But that's a minority of the population. The reality, for most people, is that most startups fail, most corporations downsize, and most workforces churn. Switching jobs every two or three years might be the norm, but it's a lot easier to do when you're 25 than when you're 39. At that point, you're essentially a senior citizen, San Francisco botox surgeon Seth Matarasso says.

"I have a friend who lived in Chicago and came back to Silicon Valley at age 38," Matarasso recalls. "And he said, 'I feel like a grandfather — in Chicago I just feel my age.'"

Retirement isn't an option for the average middle-aged worker, and even the elites — people like Westly, who were once themselves wunderkinds — find themselves in an awkward position when they hit their 50s, pandering to audiences that may have no sense of what came before. The diehards still work well past their Valley expiration date, but then survival becomes a job unto itself. Sometimes it means taking lower-pay contract work, or answering to a much younger supervisor, or seeking workplace protection in court.

For some, it means hiring consultants or personal trainers or cosmetic surgeons to create the illusion that age doesn't exist — or that a person with means can buy his way out. In an increasingly cutthroat job

market, a vanity industry that was traditionally patronized by women has grown more man-centric, and more robust.

Seth Matarasso, the undisputed botox king of San Francisco, has a unique talent for fighting time.

"Honey, I've been getting botox for 20 years," says the 56-year-old, a svelte, remarkably unlined cosmetic dermatology surgeon. "I'm old and I'm vain."

Matarasso works in a seventh floor office on Post Street with a candy dish on the reception desk and a life-size Ryan Gosling pillow in the exam room. He hits the gym at 6 a.m. every morning, drinks a protein shake, and then fasts until dinner, sustaining himself on chewing gum and decaffeinated tea. He eschews smoking, alcohol, and carbohydrates. He sees between 30 and 40 patients a day.

Botox — or "brotox," as it's often dubbed in an era when more men are seeking alterations — is quietly surging within the tech set. And Matarasso's business is surging along with it. Thirty-five-year-olds with disposable income are flocking in for common procedures: light lasers (\$300-\$500 a pop, but you need many of them), botox injections (which start at \$400-\$500), and fillers (which start at \$700). Some clients arrive looking for a quick fix, thinking the on-demand ethos of new technology can be applied to facial transformations. (In fact, botox requires constant maintenance, Matarasso says.) Others hope the surgeon's syringe might serve as a great equalizer.

"Not a day goes by that someone doesn't come in and say, 'Listen, I know I'm 45 years old, but I'm competing with kids who are fresh out of college — or who didn't even finish college. Sure, I look good, but it's a different landscape.'" The number of men seeking cosmetic enhancement has also increased significantly in the past seven years, he says, though they still view it as a taboo practice. "Usually they come in through the back door and say something like, 'I want a mole looked at — oh, and by the way...'" Matarasso grins impishly. "Is it exponential? No," he adds. "But there's been a shift, and I think that's part and parcel of the tech boom."

And it's not just the competitive job market that's driving people into his office. Tech has changed the way we date; it's changed the way we make friends; it's compelled each of us to interact with the world via an online avatar. Matarasso says he constantly gets clients who come in wanting new lips for a dating profile. He often has to turn them away.

"I don't have a magic syringe," the dermatologist says matter-of-factly. "I'm not going to take 10 years off your life." He has similar admonishments for the ones who want cosmetic enhancements just to spruce up their LinkedIn selfies.

"I'll say, 'Great, we'll get your selfie all buffed and polished, but I don't know how to break this to you. When you go on that date, when you go on that interview, now what happens?'"

Even if he turns a patient down, Matarasso says there's always another more mercenary practitioner who's willing to take up the job.

There's ample reason for a brotox broom, now that older men have to combat widespread stereotypes that they're too cautious, or just too slow.

"You'll see an increasing amount of neck-tightening, bags being removed from around the eyes, and hair replacement," "masculinist" author Warren Farrell says. In the past, he explains, men's earnings often corresponded with their height (every inch meant a \$1,000 a year increase in earning potential); now, there's an added pressure to exude vitality.

That's become a conundrum for Joseph Rosenfeld, a San Jose-based "personal brand" strategist who sees himself as the tech-savvy answer to personal stylists of yore. He's built an upstart business teaching the Valley's men and women (though he started out coaching men exclusively) how to purge their insecurities, dress for success, and "unlock their personal brand attributes."

"I don't really refer to myself as an 'image consultant,'" Rosenfeld says, sipping a basil gimlet during his Friday morning brunch at The Rotunda restaurant, an upscale joint on the fourth floor of the Neiman Marcus department store in Union Square. "That's really only one facet of my work."

Rosenfeld has been in the personal branding racket, in one form or another, for about 26 years. He started as a retail sales associate in his hometown of Chicago and moved to Silicon Valley nine years ago with designs on serving the high-tech crowd: top executives at Apple; chief technology officers; engineers and managers moving "from the skateboard to the boardroom"; people seeking new careers in middle age (most of his clients are in their 40s and 50s); female lawyers and office workers whose pantsuits and peaked lapels contrasted with the short skirts of their younger co-workers.

The trick is to get them to look more "agile," which often requires a new fitness regime, skinnier jeans, and chunkier glasses. He often encourages male clients to get regular facials or spa treatments at the

Rosewood Sand Hill hotel in Menlo Park. He'll recommend new hair products or encourage them to let their hair grow out, in a more modish or flattering style. Or, to put it another way, a younger style.

"I'm letting my own hair grow," says the strategist, whose shock of red-brown curls gives the 45-year-old a boyish air. "I did a side-by-side pic on my Facebook — one side is my Bar Mitzvah picture, and the other is a picture of me this year, captured by my great photographer."

He pauses dramatically. "I can't tell you how many people 'liked' that picture. I do in fact look like the very best version of that gawky, geeky, 13-year-old kid."

Granted, lessons in personal branding don't come cheap. Rosenfeld's program starts "in the four figures" (he declines to state exact costs) and requires that clients build two "wardrobe capsules" — one spring, one fall — in the course of the year. In the interim, he'll connect them to a network of tailors, hair-dressers, photographers, and optometrists, improve their overall presentation, and dispense regular advice on how to be fabulous. He offers three-day boot camp retreats in high-end department stores, "which is out in the wild for some people," he says.

He's just one in a bevy of entrepreneurs who've alighted on this new side of the vanity industry.

Because Silicon Valley is mostly male, and mostly composed of engineers and MBA-types, it's little surprise that the terms "beauty" and "image" have now been conflated with "personal branding." Yet beauty itself is a growth industry, says Karen Grant, vice president and global beauty industry analyst for the New York-based marketing research firm NPD Group. And men, in particular, are becoming a vital consumer demographic. "We live in a world of selfies, and that's elevated expectations," Grant says. "You're seen before you're heard."

While age discrimination exists in many industries, it seems more ubiquitous — or at least more obvious — in tech. But that's no accident. Many of these companies are designed for a fast turnaround rather than a long lifespan. They demand workers who are young and adventurous, rather than those who are experienced at developing incremental growth.

"In 2006, the average age of incoming CEOs in Fortune 500 companies was 55," says Kjerstin Gruys, a Stanford post-doctoral fellow who specializes in sociology and gender. "In 2010, they were 53. But in the tech industry, there was this huge surge of visibility of CEOs in their late 20s and early 30s."

That's certainly true of Google, which was launched by Larry Page and Sergey Brin, who were Stanford Ph.D. students at the time. It's true of Facebook, whose then-20-year-old founder, Mark Zuckerberg, started an empire from his Harvard dorm room. It's true of Twitter, whose chairman and co-founder Jack Dorsey was 30 when he helped start the company. And it's true of Snapchat, whose 24-year-old czar Evan Spiegel was humiliated this June when press outlets published racy emails he'd written as a Stanford frat boy, just five years earlier.

Even when they're walloped by scandal, these newly minted Valley oligarchs are still setting norms for the culture at large. Many of them learned the hot operating systems du jour when they were still in college, and wrote their business plans then. They never had to pass through the feudal order that exists in law or banking or finance, or any other traditional white collar industry.

That new paradigm manifests particularly in the startup market where companies have to court investment in order to survive. In the old days, most venture capitalists' goal was to steer a young company toward an IPO; thus they'd be more inclined to work with older entrepreneurs who'd have more credibility in Wall Street. Now the entire model has changed, says San Francisco employment lawyer Cliff Palefsky, who specializes in employment cases. "The goal isn't to go public," Palefsky says, "the goal is to sell the company. And as a result, VCs are happy to give some rope to younger folks with an idea."

Oftentimes, he adds, the investors will seed the business, put themselves on the board, and act as elders. "Then they'll hire a babysitter CFO and then find a way to sell the company without ever putting an older face on it."

In fact, author Farrell says, the new generation of Silicon Valley investors, many of whom are young arrivistes themselves, might actually be more inclined to lavish money on a 20-year-old with a good elevator pitch than on a grizzled 45-year-old. Older people talk too slow, he points out. They might not be up on the hottest programs, or the latest slang. They might not seem equipped to sell a company.

To Gruys, that's an odd inversion of power: There was a point not too long ago when gray hair gave off an aura of gravitas and younger employees were underlings.

"At the time this change started to materialize in tech, there were plenty of men in their late 30s who had secure jobs, weren't planning to retire at age 38, and weren't anticipating the need to look younger," she says. "These are men who've been privileged their entire lives, who weren't expecting to be old until they left the workforce," she says.

But in an economy dominated by small entrepreneurs and controlled by fickle benefactors, they're not the privileged class anymore. They might even be an impediment, according to Burstein, author of *Fast Future: How the Millennial Generation Is Shaping Our World*.

"When you're in a sandbox, saying 'Let's build something, let's play around,' you don't really want people who have lots of experience," Burstein explains. "You don't want lots of legal people. You don't want people who are saying, 'No, you can't do this.'"

He chews on the thought for a moment. "Maybe you want them as mentors," he concedes.

By many measures, the Valley's enshrinement of youth is also an enshrinement of transience — of the quick sell, of the soon-to-be-obsolete programming system, of the startup that might fail tomorrow. New business models reward the young and flighty rather than the experienced and stable. For the older people who have built up thick résumés in tech, but who say their experience is no longer valued, this cultural shift can be devastating.

One 59-year-old IT worker, who wouldn't give his name since he's looking for a job, says he put himself through the University of Chicago selling Macintosh computers and spent 23 years working as a network engineer in various capacities. Now he can't find work, doesn't qualify for credit cards, and doesn't have enough money to pay his next cellphone bill. He stopped putting his University of Chicago graduation date on his résumé, for fear of age discrimination.

To him, the problem isn't that old people are perceived as slow, or overly cautious, or pedantic. It's that having more job experience makes a person more expensive, and tech companies just aren't willing to pay.

"They'll look at my salary history, and think that if I take a lower-paying job I'll turn around and leave," the man says, adding that in recent years, he's mostly taken short-term contract gigs that don't provide job security or benefits. "Basically, these companies are doing labor arbitrage," he says, explaining that big companies routinely hire contractors for specialty IT work, and that those contractors, in turn, farm the jobs out to a contingency workforce. The primary contractor might bill the large company for \$135 an hour, but the people actually doing the work will earn half that much.

"What I'm finding is that people want to pay the lowest wages [by] hiring young guys to work full time, and then they'll have guys like me doing the contract work, so they don't have the burden of hiring another full-time permanent."

Because so many companies rely on contract labor for their IT needs, it's become harder for old-school techie fix-it people to find comfortable long-term employment. Even the ones who've managed to get steady work say they've noticed this change. P.J. Connolly, a 50-year-old self-employed contractor in San Francisco, says he's long considered himself an "IT generalist" — someone who can quickly learn a new computer program and help with office snags. He came up in an era when that skill was valuable. Fewer people owned home computers, and many barely understood how to turn them on.

But Connolly says that's not what HR departments are looking for.

"They're comfortable outsourcing what used to be really critical stuff," he explains. "Instead of having someone on-site, you have someone on call who might be responsible for 15 or 20 sites."

The new silo model has made IT work much more transient than it was 20 years ago, and created a market that tends to hurt older workers. It's harder to work as a fly-by-night contractor when you have a mortgage to pay and a family to feed. And evidently, it's harder to compete when you have a breadth of knowledge, rather than an extremely narrow expertise.

But other sides of the tech industry are even more dicey. Startups routinely pay part of their employees' salaries in stock options, presenting a risk that few older workers can afford to take. They also demand that employees stay in the office until the work is done, even if that means sitting at a computer all night. To a 20-year-old, that might be a minor inconvenience. To a 50-year-old, it's just unreasonable.

And then, for those who are lucky enough to snag a coveted in-house gig, there's the awkward, unsavory prospect of being the old guy on campus.

"There's a real collegiate mentality," the ex-Google contractor muses, recalling the months he spent shuttling down the Peninsula in a corporate coach. In the mornings, baby-faced marketers would try to cut deals over their cell phones, often using the same unctuous repartee as AM radio morning hosts. On Friday afternoons, they'd all pop beers open, he says. It became a party bus.

"Hanging out is a lot of what these people do," lawyer Palefsky says. "They're working late, they're living together, they're going out together."

And let's face it, he adds: "You don't want to hang out with your parents."

Palefsky's favorite allegory for Silicon Valley is a Star Trek episode from 1966. It begins when the Enterprise answers an SOS call from a planet that closely resembles Earth, except that its only inhabitants are children. Experiments to prolong life have killed off all the adults, and created a virus that keeps every child in stunted prepubescence for centuries. Each of them contracts a fatal disease upon hitting puberty.

We've seen that fantasy played out over and over again in films like *Children of the Corn*, about a community of kids whose members are sacrificed on their 19th birthdays, and *Logan's Run*, about a future society in which people are killed at age 30 to prevent overpopulation.

"It's sort of like that in these companies," Palefsky says. "The kids have all taken charge."

Yet cases of age discrimination — of the kids annihilating the adults, so to speak — are extremely hard to prove. In most cases, older employees aren't getting fired, per se; they're just not getting hired. Usually, there's no need for interviewers to ask age-related questions, since they can see what year a prospective candidate graduated from college.

Wrongful termination is a little more clear-cut, since the employee will have salary records and performance reviews. But even then, it might not be in an employee's best interest to litigate, Palefsky says.

"Once that case becomes public, the company will defend itself by proving your poor performance, which is where your reputation gets injured," he explains. "And then if you're competing for your next job, and you're in the middle of a lawsuit, that doesn't help you get chosen."

In such instances, the best an employee can hope for is a chunky settlement, which is how 90 percent of these cases wind up, Palefsky says. The problem is that settlements don't set legal precedents; thus, they're unlikely to change Valley culture. Two weeks after Peter Taylor filed his age discrimination complaint, Twitter released employee data that revealed a severe lack of diversity among its staff — the company's tech force is 90 percent male while its leadership is 72 percent white. The data report didn't cite age statistics because Twitter doesn't keep track of them, according to a spokesman; neither does Google.

In 2012, however, Seattle research firm PayScale published age data that confirmed many commonly-held perceptions about the tech world. The median age at Facebook was 26, while that of Google employees was 29. According to the report, tech companies operating in newer spheres — social media or search

engines, for instance — drew younger workforces. Older giants like Hewlett-Packard and Oracle had the oldest employees and the longest worker retention.

"I don't think the campus culture is necessarily youth-driven, more as it is driven by people who are willing to put their lives into their work," a 24-year-old Apple designer writes in an email. She acknowledges, however, that younger people are more likely to have this mentality, since they have fewer out-of-work responsibilities. Another designer in his 20s says most startups he's encountered are "extremely young," with design and development teams in their 20s, and a CEO in his early-to-mid-30s.

Perhaps tech companies are just prone to hiring within their own ranks; a young leadership begets a young workforce. Yet Palefsky and others believe that some corporations make a concerted effort to shut out older workers. Many have cited Mark Zuckerberg's 2007 speech at a Y Combinator Startup School event at Stanford. "Young people are just smarter," the now-30-year-old Facebook founder declared, with no apparent sense of irony.

To some, those words became infamous. To others, they became dogma.