

Managers in Their 50s

As seen in the Wall Street Journal..

Veteran Executives Are Feeling Squeezed by Younger Colleagues

SEVERAL TIMES a week now, 52-year-old Pat Garvey receives calls from unemployed business acquaintances his age who are networking to find new jobs.

Mr. Garvey, a team leader of retail floor-space management at apparel manufacturer [VF Corp.](#), Greensboro, N.C., listens sympathetically, aware that at their age they may be facing a permanent career blow. He suggests they try to leverage in new ways the skills they've acquired over decades. But he has no specific jobs to tell them about, and doubts most will ever find positions as good as the ones they have lost.

As companies continue to trim staffs in the current slowdown, 50-something managers like Mr. Garvey who have survived cuts are becoming a rare breed.

Their bosses are in their 40s, at most. Many of their peers are heading out the door after accepting buyout packages from employers eager to shed high-paid veterans.

Feeling threatened by younger, hipper, faster-moving colleagues is a rite of passage for every maturing generation of executives. Baby boomers, however, are feeling particularly squeezed. They see the corporate definition of "over the hill" getting younger -- to the age when managers used to feel they were just coming into their own.

FOR MANY, retirement is out of the question. They have had children later in life and haven't saved nearly enough to get by without a steady paycheck. Even if they don't have children to support, most aren't emotionally ready to stop working. They are far more fit and younger looking than their parents were at the same age, and they think of themselves as just hitting middle age.

Recently, a financial planner told Mr. Garvey to start thinking about retirement. "I told him wait a minute," he says. "I have a nine-year-old and school bills to pay."

Mr. Garvey must constantly prove his worth to stay in place at work. His past experience handling a variety of jobs at a number of big companies has helped him to be flexible and adapt quickly to change.

He started his career 32 years ago at Burlington Industries where he stayed for a decade before jumping to Levi Straus and becoming vice president of OshKosh B'Gosh, the children's overall brand. He joined VF seven years ago as vice president of sales and marketing for VF Playwear, a high-pressure line job.

But two years later, his bosses proposed he move out of operations to the process side of the business, and help develop software and other tools retailers used to manage merchandise. He agreed, even though it was a less-visible position in an area where he lacked experience. "It sounded like something that would be interesting to try, something challenging where I'd have to learn new skills," he says. "If you aren't willing to do that your prospects are going to be limited." The employees he manages now are in their 20s and 30s and determined to advance quickly. "When I was coming up you paid your dues," he says. "There was a defined career path, but nowadays younger people expect to move faster."

To his advantage, he works with employees in business units throughout the company. "It's broadening my horizons because I'm getting exposed to more sides of the company," he says. Still, he missed his friends in the apparel industry with whom he used to exchange business gossip and tips. He has no colleagues his age on his team.

"It's lonelier and less collegial for 50-somethings," says William Cassidy, a human-resources consultant at Resource Partnership in New York. "It's like being in a new world without the old familiar landmarks."

TO SURVIVE, these managers must pace themselves like marathon runners, adds David Noer, a Greensboro, N.C., consultant. They also have to connect to people who can help them, and "who usually aren't their old cronies," he says.

That also means communicating openly with young people and learning technology. Mr. Garvey, for example, is willing to learn from his young colleagues rather than insist he has all the answers.

Those who have bounced around among a number of companies stand a better chance of knowing how to read different corporate cultures and adjusting to different management approaches.

Frank Morgan, 57, global director of executive development and leadership at Dow Chemical, Midland, Mich., lives by the mantra of being portable, adaptive and in charge of his own career. "I'm not looking for someone to take care of me for the rest of my life," he says. He never expected lifetime employment with one company. After graduating from Princeton, he left a doctorate program in clinical psychology for a job in human resources at General Foods. Later he worked at an art-supply company managing its business in Latin America and Europe. But after realizing he had to stop traveling if he wanted his marriage to survive, he left the business world for academia, directing executive education at Darden, then the University of North Carolina.

Two years ago, after he was tapped by a recruiter, he joined Dow Chemical, moving from the South to the Midwest. Some of Mr. Morgan's peers have been laid off following the acquisition of Union Carbide. What is especially painful, he says, is that many have never worked anywhere else, and feel stranded.