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## Fighting Ageism in Silicon Valley

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Bob Crum is a former Silicon Valley tech employee who now works with FIRST 5 of Santa Clara County.

### By Bob Crum

Over the past 40 years, the contract between a technology company and its workers seems to have changed dramatically, with ageism a clear consequence. I started working in the 1970s, when tech companies typically asked for, and received, loyalty from employees and provided a degree of loyalty in return. Hewlett-Packard, where I worked, understood the significant investment already made in its employees and their intrinsic value to the company.

By the 2010s, however, that philosophy had changed dramatically. Employers, including HP, began treating employees as expendable assets. And older workers were often the most expendable.

Ageism is so prevalent in Silicon Valley today that companies don't even try to hide it.

My own career is a blueprint for this dramatic shift.

I started at HP in 1976 as a college grad with a computer engineering degree from the University of Michigan. Though I first interviewed for an engineering position, I was told I'd be offered a position in technical support.

HP was more interested in finding good people—and putting them in the right job—than it was in finding people with targeted backgrounds that filled specific positions, and passing on anyone that wasn't the “perfect” fit, which seems today's norm. HP's hiring culture changed in 1999, as documented in a [2011 study done by UC Davis](#), which concluded that HP's fall from grace as one of Fortune magazine's “100 Best Companies to Work For” to an also-ran was because of new values. “These values were organizational disrespect for employees, dissatisfaction with employees, and unfairness in employee treatment,” the study reads.

I left HP in 2005 for a stint at Sun Microsystems, and remained until 2008. In that year, Sun sustained about 9,500 layoffs, including me, at age 54.

I became an independent contractor and worked for a startup and two other tech companies until early 2016, when my contract wasn't renewed. At 62, I had probably lasted 15 years longer in the tech industry than I should have.

I continued to seek work in the tech sector, and while I tried to hide my age as best I could, the depth and breadth of my experience was a dead giveaway.

In fact, I was twice hit between the eyes with age-related bias.

After interviewing for a position for which I was extremely well qualified, I had coffee with the hiring manager, who I'd known for some time. After a few pleasantries, she told me that I wasn't going to get the job. Though disappointed, I did what I've always been coached to do. I asked why.

“We decided to give the position to someone earlier in their career,” she said.

After a similar interview at another company, I received a simple email rejection. When I asked why, a return email informed me: “Although your experience for this job is great, that experience was a long time ago.”

Silicon Valley companies seem to think that youth equates with “smarts.”

Speaking at Stanford's [Y Combinator Startup School](#) a decade ago, a then-22-year-old Mark Zuckerberg told a rapt audience, “Young people are just smarter.”

But there are many different kinds of smarts.

Older workers bring an institutional memory, stretching back decades, that can help companies navigate challenging times. They bring a level of maturity and judgment to decision-making that is based on dealing with crises, difficulties and opportunities during their career. Perhaps most

important, older workers can act as mentors to younger employees, helping build their company, industry and job function knowledge in a multi-generational workplace.

Age bias exists in Silicon Valley largely because of its “youth-obsessed” culture, which seems unlike any other in the United States. I often wonder if there are places in the country that value the experience of older people — and I hope they exist.

Thankfully, I’ve embraced my exit from the tech industry. Too young and energetic to retire, I’m now working as an [Encore.org Fellow](#) at FIRST 5 of Santa Clara County, which is dedicated to improving early childhood development.

I’m also an emerging entrepreneur, in the planning stages for my own decidedly non-tech business: a craft brewery and taproom.

I still have a lot of good years left in me.

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