

FINANCIAL TIMES

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2014

Let us live while we are young and put our ambitions on ice

BY JODY GREENSTONE MILLER

A get-to-the-top-fast mentality is out of sync with the other end of our lives, says **Jody Greenstone Miller**

Generous employee benefits are all very well. But instead of just paying for people to freeze their eggs if they want to delay childbearing, companies such as Apple and Facebook should also help reshape the soul-crushing expectation that climbing the corporate ladder as fast – and as young – as possible is the way to rise to the top.

A culture that glorifies outsized professional achievement at a young age is at odds with the rest of our life cycle. Many people in their 20s, 30s, and 40s also want to devote time and energy to establishing relationships and raising children. What's more, today's fast-moving culture ignores the longer careers made possible by health advances that leave more of us able to work ambitiously, if we want to, well into our 60s and 70s.

All of which raises the subversive question: what is the rush? It is time to redefine the timeline of professional success.

The path to sanity starts with a clear sense of why the ideal pace of achievement keeps accelerating. Two factors dominate. The first is the ability of certain sectors today – think hedge funds and technology – to produce unimaginable riches for some people at tender ages. If it is indeed possible to make tens of millions of dollars by the time you are 35, why would you not kill yourself to

do that? While finding such roles resembles winning the lottery, the allure is real enough to lead many to put off the call of family and everything else in life.

The second and related factor is the cultural glamour now bestowed on the young. There are only so many magazine covers of “30 Under 30 To Watch” we can take at the supermarket checkout without feeling our envy meter tilt into the depression zone.

This faster sensibility has percolated in damaging ways throughout corporate America. Recruiters routinely peddle the idea that if you are not advancing at the “right pace” you are somehow a “loser”. Too many bosses only see you as ambitious if you work around the clock.

It does not have to be like this. A company can create the conditions for employees to work less and still aspire to leadership roles. They can design jobs that can be done in manageable chunks, and then let people become leaders in those areas even if they do not work late. If such alternative paths to the top are not possible, it is the company's fault – a function of management laziness, and lack of imagination.

A get-to-the-top-fast mentality is also out of sync with the other end of our lives. We are living longer, our kids will (we hope) have moved out of the house, and we will have a lot of time on our hands. There is no reason our 50s, 60s and 70s should not be as professionally productive as our early years.

The list of those whose wisdom and experience helped to fuel professional achievements later in life is inspiring. Colonel Harland Sanders opened his first Kentucky Fried Chicken store at 65.

Daniel Defoe completed *Robinson Crusoe* just before his 60th birthday. Mark Twain published *Huckleberry Finn* at age 49. Peter Mark Roget did not invent his thesaurus until he was 73. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, about a quarter of new entrepreneurs are now aged 55 to 64, up from 15 per cent two decades ago.

The actual amount of work over a lifetime may not change much; it would just be spread out over a longer period. If our work was not compressed into the first 25 years of a career, we would have more left in our tank for the next 25.

And, do not underestimate the energy and drive of those of us who have passed the age of 50 – particularly if instead of freezing our eggs, some of us chose to freeze our ambition. My daughter is about to head off to college and I am feeling my animal spirits rise. For those of us who still have an urge to leave a bigger fingerprint on the world, rushing finally makes sense.

The writer is co-founder and chief executive of Business Talent Group, an independent consultant marketplace.