

Time's running out for the tech giants to fix an age-old issue

Silicon Valley has done little to alter the fact it is dominated by young white men, finds *James Titcomb in San Francisco* and *Hasan Chowdhury*

When Robin Wolaner left media giant Time Warner to join the internet publisher Cnet in 1997, she went from being one of the youngest people in the room to the oldest.

Cnet was one of the first internet companies, having been started by a group of men in their 20s, and Wolaner had been brought on to help bring it to profitability.

Before the dotcom crash, she says, this was normal: Silicon Valley investors would often demand that experienced heads be brought in to replace or mentor a company's unproven founder.

"I had just turned 40 and at Time Warner I was a Young Turk, but as soon as I moved to Cnet I was seasoned management," Wolaner says. "In those days it was welcomed."

Such opportunities are more sparse today, despite the tech boom, and Wolaner has since moved to work in non-profits. "I recognised a good tech position wasn't going to come up."

She says she now advises friends seeking jobs in tech to "de-age" their CVs, removing the years they went to university and even their early jobs, so as not to give the game away. "The joke is if you look at someone's LinkedIn and they have the years of their graduation, they must be under 40."

Silicon Valley has become the economic powerhouse of the world, but it is a distinctly homogeneous one.

Tech's persistent diversity problems have been well documented: the

industry is dominated by white men. Less remarked upon is that it is dominated by young men. The average age at Facebook is 29, according to a 2016 study by Payscale. At Google it is 30 and Apple it is 31 (the companies publish annual reports about race and gender diversity but do not release their own figures for age). The average age of all workers in both the US and UK is more than a decade greater.

One tech employee in his early 60s was recently laid off from a top-10 company, which he asked not to be named, in a so-called restructuring, only for the company to later hire somebody to do the same job.

He says his age would often be the subject of workplace jokes and that he would go to lengths to appear younger, including wearing contact lenses instead of glasses, Botox injections and wearing long-sleeved shirts at sales conference to hide his forearms.

A survey of UK and US employees by jobs website Dice recently found that more tech industry workers said they had experienced or witnessed age discrimination at work than other forms. And discrimination starts early. A poll of start-up founders by venture firm First Round Capital found that the most common age at which investors' biases kick in is between 36 and 40.

"It's an enormous problem," says Scott Cole, an employment lawyer in California, where it is illegal to deny job opportunities to over-40s. Cole says he now sees more age discrimination cases than anything else. Last year, Google settled one lawsuit after hundreds of spurned applicants had accused the company of systemic bias.

Dr David Sieber, a plastic surgeon in San Francisco, says that his patients are younger and more male than the national average, and those that work in tech are focused largely on anti-ageing treatments.

"I see patients who have said they need to look younger for their job ... they feel like they're competing in a group of younger people and they need to fit in," he says.

Wolaner lays the blame partly at investors' doors. The two most successful tech companies of the



Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg are far from the youngest men in Silicon Valley

post-dotcom era, Google and Facebook, have both been defined by their young founders, despite the former's early success being in large part due to the veteran leadership of Eric Schmidt.

As a result, she says, venture capitalists have looked for more Mark Zuckerbergs and Larry Pages, founders who were shaped by their time at university and are likely to hire more people like them.

Zuckerberg himself has appeared to promote age discrimination. "If you want to found a successful company, you should only hire young people with technical expertise," he told an audience of start-up founders more than a decade ago.

It is a sentiment Facebook's founder would not doubt disown today. The comments do, however, betray a truth about life in Silicon Valley, particularly at start-ups. Sitting around coding at midnight over cold pizza is fine in one's 20s, but 40s or 50s?

Cole dismisses this idea, saying the same arguments about the importance of "cultural fit" have often been used to

justify discrimination against working mothers. "There has to be a recognition that [employees] are not just going to fit in to that sort of time [schedule]."

If there is hope for older workers, it may lie in Silicon Valley's current reckoning. Some much needed structural change and corporate governance could open the doors for more senior people to come into the front and back offices of tech firms, those who can keep the industry's old habits at bay.

Carmen Rey, who runs the online jobs board NoAgeismInTech, is just one person attempting to do this. She realised something needed to be done after her husband, who was 39 at the time and had almost two decades of experience as a software engineer, was suddenly struggling to get a job.

"We realised when he was applying for the roles, some of the ads were focused on younger professionals, offering entertainment benefits like cool offices with video-games, team social trips etc, which may not be quite attractive for a more experienced professional," she says. Ever since, she

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has been making a concerted effort to seek out firms that prioritise diversity.

Some of the top start-ups and companies in the UK, such as Monzo, TransferWise and Asos have all been receptive to the idea, posting job vacancies on the website in a bid to attract people, whatever their age.

Not all shifts in attitude are likely to come from a place of goodwill. "The people who joined these start-ups, as they start getting a bit older ... self-interest will start to dominate," says Purvis Ghani, a partner at law firm Stephenson Harwood.

He adds that in the UK, there is some catching up to do with the US, where legislation around age discrimination was introduced as far back as 1967. It was less than a decade ago in the UK that people could be protected under the Equality Act 2010.

But it is a dawning reality on both sides of the Atlantic that having a workforce with a different perspective, and more to lose, may act as a brake on some of the industry's worst impulses.

Or as Ghani puts it: "It's a ticking time bomb."

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A case of love and hate for Tesla's 'Musketees'

Superfans of Elon Musk's electric cars are fervent in their adoration – and quick to defend it against critics, writes *Olivia Rudgard*

It's hot in Palo Alto, California, and Tesla's superfans are out in force. Earth Day, an event organised by the city, includes stalls from environmental groups and a fun run to promote water saving. But it's the car park full of gleaming electric cars that's stealing the limelight.

This is Tesla's stronghold, just 25 minutes from its flagship factory in Fremont. Convened by local group Tesla Owners of Silicon Valley, the cars are there to be test driven by curious members of the unconverted.

Tesla evangelicals are here to preach, but also pay homage. This weekend, owners will deliver Krispy Kreme doughnuts, paid for out of their own pockets, to keep employees going as they work to hit end-of-quarter delivery targets. Last year, fans even turned out to help the company complete deliveries by walking new owners through the features of their car.

This may seem like harmless, if bizarre, fandom, but there's a dark side to people who idolise the company and Elon Musk, its chief executive. Some of Tesla's so-called "Musketees" are so passionate about their hero that they target and harass anyone who dares to criticise him.

Factions of Musk's fan club often engage in bruising debates with "non-believers" online – usually on Twitter – and the rows can spill over into the real world. Journalists, particularly female ones, are often relentlessly trolled on social media for any criticism of the company. Many argue this behaviour belongs to just a small "toxic" set

of Musk fans. But of all the corporations in the world, Tesla is unique in having a fan base that is so fervent in its adoration of the business. So why are owners so dedicated to the cause?

"The product is better than anything," says John Stringer, 32, the founder of the Silicon Valley group, citing Tesla's Autopilot system, which helps drivers navigate highway traffic.

At the Palo Alto event owners are eager to show off the hi-tech features of their cars, such as the Model X's "dancing" – waving its doors and wing mirrors. A demonstration brings the car park to a standstill.

The Twitter feed of Musk is full of fans asking for new features, and the car's software means these can be introduced over the air when the car is updated. After one asked Musk for "dog mode", a feature where the car is kept cool while parked to keep dogs safe inside, it took the firm a matter of months to introduce it. Musk's

7,000

The number of subscribers to the YouTube channel Tesla Raj, set up less than a year ago by a fan making Tesla videos

Twitter antics have landed his company in hot water more than once, but also hold the key to some of his appeal to fans.

"I just love the fact that I'm a layman who is able to interact with a billionaire ... I got four likes in four days from the dude," says Stringer. Musk recently took a Twitter hiatus after saying he would delete his

Tesla cars have some very devoted fans



account (he later returned and deleted that tweet).

"Don't get me wrong, it's boring without him. But I would still be doing this owner's club and all the other stuff even if it wasn't for him."

Tesla-mania isn't confined to Silicon Valley. Tom Frame, 50, the managing director of London-based design consultancy Etch, says he is "fully subscribed to the cult of Elon".

For him, Musk was a big draw. "Elon Musk's fundamental belief that this was possible, when everybody else told him it wasn't possible, is what I've really bought into," he says.

Tesla does no formal advertising and less proactive PR than a lot of other companies, so some fans are motivated by a desire to protect the brand, which is the subject of almost constant controversy and scrutiny.

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Raj, 36, who didn't want to give his last name, started making Tesla videos less than a year ago. His YouTube channel Tesla Raj now has almost 7,000 subscribers.

"I always wanted to be an advocate – someone to share knowledge," he says. "I'm really doing it out of sheer joy." He says he loves the fact that the company is "disrupting an age-old industry" by bringing electric cars into the mainstream. If Tesla's fans are unusually dedicated, so are its detractors, who regularly engage in fact-finding missions to unearth information about the company's health, posing their findings on Twitter.

"Yeah, I think in both realms, from both sides, it could be taken down some notches," says Raj.

Spanish-born Ignacio Andreu, 35, and his wife Vanessa Ramos, 38, are both tech workers in San Francisco. They spend "several hours a week" producing their Tesla newsletter, which they have been sending weekly since March last year.

Why so dedicated? "They seem like good people, like good humans," says Andreu. "I came for the cars, stayed for the people."