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## CHANGE @ WORK

Try a Reverse-Mentor for Forward Progress

*By Patricia Kitchen*

So how many people are going to argue with Jack Welch? To many he's the management hero of corporate America-the soon-to-be-retiring chief executive of General Electric. And what's one piece of advice he gave his senior managers? To engage in "reverse mentoring." In other words, find some bright young 20-something in the company who will help you get up-to-speed with e-commerce, the Web and this changing work culture of ours.

If it's good enough for Jack Welch, it's good enough for me-and maybe for you, too. Only I'm giving reverse-mentoring my own twist. I'm looking to sharp, successful 20-somethings to give me a reality check on my own career. I'm asking such questions as: Do my skills and image seem up-to-date? What new resources should I know about? What work-related experiences should I be having? These are things worth knowing, not with an eye to changing jobs, but with an eye to staying marketable and useful to my own employer in a world so heavily influenced by the Internet. And, while you won't find me suddenly sporting green nail polish or an ankle tattoo, I have already received some good advice for staying up-to-date.

Now, I know that asking for such help isn't easy. We baby boomers have been used to ruling the roost. We paid our dues, figured out how to climb the corporate ladder, how to find older mentors, recover from downsizing and reinvent ourselves. So now do we have to ask for help from those we think we should be mentoring? But, the work world is changing and young people are having an astounding influence. As Ellen Eichelbaum says, this "is a permanent shift unless the world changes its axis-and I don't see it changing soon." She's a corporate gerontologist from Northport who helps companies and individuals with intergenerational communication. (See [www.SpeakEasyGroup.com](http://www.SpeakEasyGroup.com).) What we may want to strive for is a little humility-plus the ability to see young people in a new light, and get over the idea that they are "27-year-old punks who are running million-dollar businesses," she says.

And what might make all this really palatable is framing it as a two-way street. We get useful advice, and younger people might just learn a thing or two from us-such as coaching, managing and leadership skills. Eichelbaum calls this "intergenerational coaching" because both parties benefit.

At Chase Manhattan Bank, the ExecTech program was designed with just that in mind. Seasoned executives get tutored by young tech types, who actually get coaching

training, which goes a long way to relieve any intimidation factor, says Lauren Sontag, senior vice president of organizational capability. What has she learned from her younger tutor? Some wild moves with her Palm Pilot.

Lena L. West also advanced her people skills when she coached her "40-going-on-50-something" aunt, an executive looking to retirement who wants to write articles for younger businesswomen. But, says West, chief executive of xynoMedia Enterprises in Yonkers, "she was worried how they would view her, whether her experience is even valid nowadays, and what the tone of her column should be. She didn't want to try to sound hip and risk sounding like an idiot, but she did want to sound with-it and not stuck in some time warp." West filled her aunt in on tone, Netiquette skills, and e-mail lists, and in turn learned an appreciation for not assuming "someone knows something just because you do." Her general advice to Baby Boomers: "Let your guards down. Boomers were developed in the IBM schema-gray suits, navy ties, gray skirts. They need to get past that and understand the person with green hair in the subway car may be the CEO of the next account they pitch."

So how about the advice I've gotten from younger coaches? A former recruiter with Silicon Alley Connections told me to consider publishing my own e-newsletter on the side, which would put me in that hip, new world without having to develop new, hard skills.

And Mark Oldman, co-founder and vice chairman of careers site Vault.com, told me about [www.mediabistro.com](http://www.mediabistro.com), which offers a bulletin board and events listing for media professionals.

He said, too, I should consider creating my own Web site. It's a snap, he says. Just pick up a copy of "HTML for Dummies." According to him, that would send the message that "this chick is with it." If you're already on to this reverse mentoring, I would love to hear about it. Write to tell me about the coaching you're getting from a younger person-or that you are giving to someone more seasoned.

As for me, I'm off to see if I can register my new Web domain name, [www.with-it-chick.com](http://www.with-it-chick.com).