

# The wisdom of old lawyers

Experience is the most valuable asset law firms own, and that shouldn't be forgotten, argues **Dr Bob Murray**



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**A** great friend of mine, a partner in a worldwide Top 10 law firm, is being eased out. Admittedly he's leaving with a good deal, but eased out nevertheless. He is, shock, horror, in his fifties and leaders of his outfit don't think he fits in with their new go-go strategy. He'll be okay, he'll find a portfolio of boards to sit on and be bored to death.

Everyone wants young lawyers. Firms want to fast-track young talent to become partners; Lawyers On Demand and the like want young lawyers to become self-employed day-laborers; outfits providing commoditised legal services want young lawyers to do the grunt work before an even cheaper AI alternative comes along – like Uber and its drivers.

As a society, we're fixated with

youth – we're obsessed with the problems of millennials (more so than with the idiosyncrasies of Gens Y and X), our marketers are focused on selling to them (even though the market with the most disposable income is the 35 to 55 age group), many businesses are more anxious to hire them than their older colleagues (they're cheaper), and so forth. We've forgotten wisdom.

As a behavioral neurogeneticist I find this all very interesting, not to mention societally self-defeating. Several studies have shown that wisdom is absent in millennials since we gain wisdom as we age. It's a trade-off. After about the age of 25 we slowly lose mathematical problem-solving and the capacity to multi-task with any effectiveness but the trade-off is that, equally slowly, we gain wisdom. We gain the ability to solve complex non-mathematical problems, we become better listeners, we become better able to get out of ourselves and be less ego-centric. Overall we become more creative problem-solvers.

But what is wisdom? In a recent study, researchers defined wisdom as 'a combination of such abilities as intellectual humility, consideration of others' perspective, and looking for compromise'. All things we gain with age. A colleague of mine, one of America's best known psychiatrists, put it this way:

'Wisdom is the combination of knowledge and experience. These two come together to forge questions. Wisdom is not shown in what you say, but in what you ask.' He added that the young are so ego-centric and so busy proving themselves that they are compelled to make statements, usually self-promoting, in quick-fire time.

In strictly technical terms, wisdom is the ability of two areas of the brain to function well together. These are the ventral striatum and the prefrontal cortex (PFC). The PFC used to be called the command and control centre of the brain because it's where most conscious thought, goal setting, and planning are located. These two areas only come to collaborate well as we age.

Teenagers have emotions and thoughts and can set goals, but they have little or no wisdom. The same is true of most people in their twenties. A Harvard study found that, generally, men below the age of 45 were too ego-centric to be a CEO or run any substantial organisation for the benefit of anyone except themselves. They have too little wisdom. Women gain wisdom a bit earlier. They are better at compromise and relationship-forming than men of an equivalent age.

As we get older, neuroticism goes down – we become better at handling emotions. At the

same time, conscientiousness and agreeableness go up – we become progressively more responsible, less ego-centric, and less antagonistic.

The reality of law is that the clients of the future – the young leaders of high-tech or dot-com enterprises – are going to need their adviser's guidance, their wisdom. They will need those who have the self-confidence, composure, and experience to ask the questions that will challenge them.

The wisdom of older lawyers is the most valuable asset law firms have; it attracts those clients that have enterprise, innovation, and enthusiasm, but no wisdom. To quote the regional managing partner of another Top 10 firm: 'I am getting more work than ever, but it's not strictly "legal" work. Being a lawyer helps, and gets me in the door, but pretty soon my questioning leads them to new realisations about their businesses and I become their consigliere – their adviser in a wide range of areas.'

If the direction of legal practice is towards more problem-solving rather than technical issues to do with the law, then it would seem obvious that the most valuable lawyers will be the older ones – though some of these may need a bit of, dare I say it, coaching or psychotherapy to help them take advantage of their increasing wisdom. **SJ**