

In Their Prime

Motivating senior reporters

By Sharon L. Peters, *PhD*

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to the 20 reporters who were so generous with their time and candor. It is never easy for a reporter to become the interviewee, and these 20 made the transition with grace. A large measure of gratitude also goes to the editors who carefully considered their staffs and recommended the ideal candidates for this project.

In Brief

In this study, researcher Sharon Peters, PhD talks with 20 top-performing reporters age 40 and older to find out what motivates them and how managers could improve the performance of all senior reporters.

Although they are all recognized as high performers, they are not, generally, workaholics. They still are excited by the ‘big story’ and driven by the same sense of insecurity and high standards that drove them early in their careers. The majority crave the challenge and guidance that working for an experienced editor would provide and instead feel frustrated that their editors are often far less experienced than they are.

Many of the reporters feel underused and under-appreciated. They want to see their experience shared through the mentoring of younger reporters and want to be consulted by newsroom managers on subjects beyond just their current beats. They want feedback and generally feel they get little, if any.

Most feel that there is no age that is too old for reporting but say newsrooms must adapt and change their expectations of older reporters, giving more weight to quality over quantity and to insights of experience.

The collective portrait that these twenty reporters paint suggest an engaged, concerned group that can serve as a reservoir of experience if they continue to be nurtured into the second halves of their careers.

BY MICHEAL P. SMITH

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Sitting on a Goldmine

Every young journalist needs someone in the newsroom who will take her aside and explain the difference between disinterested and uninterested, how to find the mayor after hours at his brother's bar, and to *never* ever call the publisher by the nickname that everyone uses.

When they were breaking into the business, most baby boomer journalists had an older ally who showed them the ropes. Today that older reporter/younger reporter alliance still exists; the only difference is that boomers are on the older side of the equation. The mentoring today operates both ways. A 21-year-old reporter, fresh out of journalism school, is just as likely to show the older reporter how to make a dropped cap initial or paginate the calendar page as he or she is to receive pointers from the veteran.

This new role for boomer journalists, and the skills it requires, is consistent with research the Newspaper Management Center has conducted over the years. Editors and journalists have clearly said that a beginning journalist just entering the workforce must demonstrate several key characteristics: clear thinking, people skills and curiosity. For the mid-career professional, they need these skills in addition to abilities as a teacher and coach.

NMC research on generational differences in management also showed that this effort becomes complicated when you consider the difference between baby boomers and younger reporters. Young reporters from Generation X want and crave constant feedback. A young friend just took a reporting job

that offered her \$8,000 a year less than she would get at a larger newspaper because the managing editor of the paper she chose promised her that he would partner her with a veteran reporter whom she admired, and the managing editor assured her that he personally would review her clips weekly and help her improve.

Baby boomers crave independence. They hate to get and give direct feedback. Many veteran reporters and current middle managers say the worst part of their job is the "needy, high-maintenance" young reporting staff. These two sets of attitudes—embodied in the younger reporter's craving for feedback and the older journalist's desire for independence—begin to illustrate the problem senior editors face in using older reporters to help teach younger reporters journalistic skills.

The need to maximize this relationship is supported in the business literature. Chris Argyris, the Harvard professor who wrote about *The New York Times* in "Behind the Front Page," writes in the *Harvard Business Review*: "Twenty-first century corporations will find it hard to survive, let alone flourish, unless they get better work from their employees. This does not necessarily mean harder work or more work. What it does mean is employees who have learned to take active responsibility for their own behavior, develop and share first-rate information about their jobs, and make good use of genuine empowerment to shape lasting solutions to fundamental problems." Other academics have talked about the next century as being the century of the knowledge worker whose main tool is her brain and whose product is information. If that is true, newspapers appear to be sitting on a gold mine. How should newspapers tap this resource? Jon R. Katzenbach, director of McKinsey & Co. consultants, has seen many companies and industries in transition. One of his books, *Real Change Leaders*, prescribes an

ideal set of traits for what he calls the real change agents—those leaders down in the ranks who cause change on the peripheries before senior management even notices or understands it. These traits may be useful in thinking about how to maximize the gold mine of older workers:

"Change leaders... find that a handful of specific actions seem to work most of the time: Forcing reality to the forefront (tell it like it is); focusing on early wins (get something done fast); appealing to a clear and compelling vision (reach both their hearts and their minds); creating an infectious environment for change (make it contagious); and expanding leadership capacity (take risks on people and approaches)."

Both Katzenbach and Professor Argyris are proponents of the concept of stewardship. What they and others, such as Peter Block, suggest is that organizations have to change in such a way that the people who are closest to the customer are empowered (and seize the power) of decision making. In effect, they have to become stewards for the company. If you are a senior manager in a newspaper, this concept could be liberating. You have a group of veteran information gatherers and storytellers who know the community. If you can encourage them to force reality and create a courageous environment, they can mentor you.

That may not be easy. Sharon Peters' research in this report shows that many of the widely admired journalists she interviewed had been put into management positions and had bad experiences. Her research grows from exploratory discussions that NMC's Editorial Leadership Initiative team had with editors and industry leaders. Many editors see that gold mine of veteran talent yet fear that it is inaccessible through resistance or indifference. There is hope: Peters' research shows that the hearts of journalists are still committed to excellence.

Reporters in Their Prime

Newsrooms, like the rest of America, are aging. *The Newspaper Journalists of the '90s*, a 1997 ASNE report, found that 44 percent of newsroom employees are 40 or older, an unprecedented older-worker proportion, at least in recent history. Moreover, the percentage of newsroom employees who are 41 to 50 years old has more than doubled in the last eight years, spiking from 15 to 32 percent. Clearly, the graying of newsrooms is a phenomenon worthy of attention, and the reporter corps is of particular interest for several reasons:

- The job of being a reporter has changed in fundamental ways, requiring a re-examination and redefinition of many values, skills and motivations. Can reporters adapt? Will they want to?
- The reality of the management pyramid means that most reporters in their 40s and 50s will continue to be reporters for the rest of their careers. Can they find as much excitement in and enthusiasm for their work during the final 20 years as they did in their first 20 years?
- The role of the reporter is one that requires a significant amount of energy. How will the aging process affect their resilience, their priorities and perhaps even the essence of their reporting?

In the current environment, it is more important than ever to employ strong employees who consistently provide high quality work—and older employees are pivotal. Not only do they take a lion's share of the salary pool because of their longevity, they often set the water level for the rest of the staff.

Making the most of these changing demographics will require developing some understanding about an age group that has been largely ignored. Newspaper work has traditionally been young people's work, at least in the majority sense. So most assumptions, expectations and practices of newsroom culture (and management principle) focus on the 32-year-old rather than the 52-year-old.

There is no simple means for adapting to this swelling pool of middle-agers. However, a first step is identifying some of their issues, concerns and private thoughts.

To this end, 20 top-performing over-40 reporters from throughout the country were interviewed at length. They discussed their childhoods, their educations, their careers, their victories and their disappointments with candor.

The information they shared provides a strong foundation for understanding over-40 reporters working in and adjusting to newspapering of the 1990s.

Equally important is the insight they can provide into what goes into the making of a top performer. Although the 20 reporters come from a variety of backgrounds and followed decidedly different career paths, there are some notable similarities in their experiences, attitudes and values. Learning about those commonalties may help newsrooms find ways to turn around some of the lesser post-40 performers as well as develop a practical roadmap for ensuring that greater numbers of reporters currently in their 20s and 30s evolve into strong performers.

Key Findings

There is virtually no area in which there is 100 percent agreement among this group. These are 20 distinct individuals who are by no means interchangeable. There are among them stylists and copy-crankers, specialists and generalists, lifers and career hoppers, liberals and conservatives, family people and never-marrieds.

There are also, however, some notable commonalties—areas in which there is as much as 90 percent agreement. These include some of their work habits, life and career experiences, concerns, viewpoints and motivations.

Among them:

They are not, by and large, workaholics (although the same could not have been said 10 years ago). A four-fifths majority work 50 hours a week or less and eight of those people work 40 to 44 hours a week.

Only about half are quite sure that when they retire it will be from a newspaper. A quarter fall into the "possibly," "maybe" or "probably" camp; the remaining quarter say they probably will not retire from a newspaper.

The majority—16 of the 20—long to work for a more seasoned, more experienced editor. While most of them have quite good working relationships with their current editors, most say their editor isn't sufficiently experienced, or simply doesn't have enough time to give them what they need at this point in their careers.

Three-quarters are dismayed by what they regard as a growing number of "older slackers" within the reporter ranks. While they do not speak with one voice on this issue—some feel strongly that the reporters themselves are largely to blame, some feel strongly that management is to blame—most believe it is a problem that must be addressed and both camps are frustrated with, and disappointed in, managements that allow the problem to continue.

Most, despite their years of experience and presumed stature, are quite insecure about their work. The specter of self-doubt beckons relentlessly, shoved back only rarely and only temporarily.

Many have grown concerned in recent years about the impact aging will have on their careers. Thirteen identify as their greatest professional fear some aging-related concern: that they will be pushed aside or ignored, that they'll lose their edge or that some physical or mental impairment will afflict them.

A three-fifths majority believe there is no systemic bias against older employees in their own newsrooms. The eight who believe there is aging bias cite subtle but implacable thinking among managers that results in older workers being minimized, discounted or given fewer opportunities.

Seventeen of the 20 have a fairly dim view of middle management. Most say the majority of middle-managers have allowed themselves to become little more than yes men and women for upper-management, most believe a high proportion of middle managers are promoted before they have had sufficient reporting experience to be any real help to the reporters they oversee, and most believe middle managers are sorely lacking in people skills.

Most still live for and are pumped by the big story. They suffer mightily when they flounder between stories and endure wracking pangs when they're not producing.

Virtually all—18 of the 20—have developed in their older years a great desire to mentor, to be sought out by others for advice and assistance. Being regarded as an eminence gris of sorts—by staff and management alike—is one of their greatest sources of professional pleasure.

Nineteen of the 20 believe that there is no age too old to be an effective reporter. But most believe newsroom culture must modify expectations relating to older reporters—to appreciate quality as much as quantity and also to learn to value the critical thinking, wisdom and judgment of senior reporters (and establish routes by which those can be tapped.)

Most have adapted to the shifting trends of newspaper work and 16 of the 20 believe that some of the various changes have improved their newspapers and their own work. However, 17 of the 20 are disturbed by what they see as the absolute emphasis on presentation over content and want management to level the balance so fairness, journalistic integrity and solid reporting and writing are valued as much—and discussed as much—as sidebars, graphics, outreach and entertainment.

Sixteen of the 20 have no desire to eventually enter management. Most already have experienced that particular adventure and have no real interest in revisiting it. They expect to remain reporters as long as they stay in the business.

METHODOLOGY

Participants in this project were chosen by the editors or managing editors of the papers at which they work.

Each of the editors contacted by the researcher was asked to select a post-40 reporter (or reporters) meeting all of the following criteria:

1. Productive

The reporter writes not just the bare minimum of stories to get by but enthusiastically scours his or her beat, is a frequent byline presence and is often called upon when there is a project or breaking news story that requires special skills, critical thinking, organizational abilities or insights.

2. *Quality conscious*

The reporter's stories have the depth and breadth that would be expected of a senior reporter.

3. *Embraces change*

The reporter has adapted to change, has modified work-style or approach and is open to input, suggestions and feedback that different might be better.

4. *Is a model for less-experienced reporters.*

This is a reporter about whom an editor can say, "this is what success looks like," and about whom it can be said, "this person has consistently become better and will likely improve even more."

The only other limiting criterion was that the reporter had to have been employed at his or her current newspaper for at least three years.

A total of 29 editors in 26 states was contacted. Two did not respond, eight said no one met all the criteria and one offered a suggestion from a paper other than his own

All of the 20 reporters identified by editors as candidates for the project agreed to participate on the condition of anonymity.

All reporters were interviewed in person by the researcher (with occasional telephone follow-ups) and the discussions ranged in duration from 2.5 hours to five hours. The interview centered around 74 questions, ranging from early childhood experiences to newsroom experience, but it was conversational in nature, allowing for much in the way of digression, musings and rumination.

The conversations were tape-recorded, transcribed and placed on content-analysis matrices to determine frequencies of answers. Frequencies have undergone no statistical analysis, but rather have been calculated in straight numbers and percentages.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The 20 reporters are from 18 newspapers in 17 states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, Tennessee and Virginia.

The newspapers range in published circulation size from 41,000 to 1.5 million. Three of the reporters represent newspapers with circulations under 100,000; three are 101-150,000; three are 150-250,000; six are 251,000-350,000; and three are over 400,000.

Of the 20 reporters, 17 are males, three are females. One is black. They range in age from 41 to 71. Seven are 41-45, nine 40-50, three 51-55 and one is over 55. The average number of years in the news business is 24.3 years.

Three are from sports, four from news, seven from features, four from investigative teams, one from special projects and one from business.

Their educational credentials range from less than high school to masters degrees. Two did not receive college degrees and one finished his college course work after joining a newspaper staff; 10 have journalism degrees (although half of them started college with majors other than journalism); seven have English degrees (mostly from state universities) and one has a degree in sociology and urban studies. Four have masters degrees in journalism.

Twelve are married to their first spouse, two have had two spouses and three are married to their third spouse. Two have never married and one is now divorced.

Of those who married, all but one has children. Two have 1 child, six have two children, seven have three children, one has four children and one has five children.

The Early Years

Most of the reporters in this study had Mayberry-like upbringings (or the regional equivalent) in small-town or rural America, where dads had jobs (often ones they disliked), moms didn't and kids were expected to get good grades and keep out of trouble.

Four grew up in blue-collar families (mostly farmers and factory workers), 14 grew up in middle class families (four of them on the decidedly lower end of middle class), one came from an upper middle class family and one from what would be categorized as poor.

For many, though not all, there was the expectation that they would go to college and in all but five cases, they would surpass their parents in doing so.

There were the predictable bumps, difficulties and disappointments that would be expected of a cohort of mostly baby boomers. Four sets of parents divorced before the youngsters made it to high school; fathers of most of them were, in keeping with the era, quite remote; and three of the middle-class families experienced periods of economic hardship, living through cycles that descended into, or bordered on, poverty.

But more than half of the reporters, 11 of them, coped with trauma, drama and events far beyond typical for children of that era.

Four had an alcoholic parent and one of those four had the additional difficulty of growing up gay in a farming community and feeling compelled from age 6 to hide his homosexuality from everyone.

One lost his mother to cancer at age five. And his father was so spectacularly unsuccessful at earning money that the youngster was often the family's sole financial support, turning over his paper-route money to buy food and skipping lunches sometimes in order to afford a haircut.

One lived a singularly peripatetic existence, hauled across the map with a regularity so consistent as her father sought work that she rarely spent more than a year or two in the same school, or even the same city. Eventually, she was left to fend for herself at age 16, an event which prompted her to seek early college admission so she would have a place to stay.

One grew up in a coal town, where death and maimings were woven solidly into the fabric of the culture. Each month brought news of yet another hideous mining disaster, the most horrific, perhaps, being the brutal accident which so thoroughly crushed his uncle that the largest body part that could be found and buried was the man's thumb.

One struggled mightily with school and discovered only in adulthood that he had a mild learning disability.

Three were so painfully shy, so profoundly socially awkward, that they were derided by their classmates (and in one case, a teacher) in intensely humiliating ways.

Whatever their family lives, struggles and successes, the 20 reporters displayed some remarkably similar characteristics in youth and had some parallel life experiences.

Asked for five adjectives that describe what they were like as kids, 11 said shy, introverted or loners; nine said curious; six said self-conscious or unsure of themselves; six adventuresome or

12 were voracious readers when they were children; 11 are big readers now.

mischievous; four said hardworking; four said studious; four said energetic or active; and four recalled they had a strong sense of justice or social right and wrong. Other similarities: Most began working at quite early ages (often by age 9 or 10, usually at paper routes, helping on the family farm or tending to younger siblings); and most have vivid recollections of the first significant thing they ever wrote—usually by the third or fourth grade. These early forays

into writing were far beyond what would be expected of young children and were usually private exercises rather than schoolwork. As examples: A fictional diary at age 5, an illustrated book at age 8, an autobiography (sold to accommodating relatives) at age 8, a book of short stories at age 9.

Abiding by their parents' expectations, most did pretty well academically in high school. Fifteen earned very good grades (hovering at the top 10 or 20 percent of their classes) and five were average (C students) or below average. Socially, however, it was a different story. Only four were part of the crowd that joined clubs, ran for office, played sports and made an indelible impression on their classmates. The rest, fully 80 % , were outcasts, geeks and nerds, or borderline versions of the same. They belonged to no clubs or only a couple, typically the bowling club or the Latin club or the ham radio operator club. "Always on the fringe," "a loner," "a wannabe who didn't wanna quite enough to bother very much" and "social retard" was how some of them described themselves.

Even those traditional safe havens for the pathologically shy or the highly creative with a yen for self expression—school newspapers and yearbooks—did not draw in many of them. Fewer than half—eight—ventured into high school journalism, although most of them had already received some acclaim or discovered the private pleasure of writing by the time they had reached high school.

Few regarded writing as a potential vocation. And when they went off to college—generally to state universities—it was mostly as English or psychology or political science majors. Of the 18 who eventually earned degrees, 13 began college in pursuit of degrees other than journalism.

But a chance encounter with a campus or hometown newsroom, usually through coercion from friends or teachers, eventually prompted two to change their majors and one other to decide on a career in journalism (while not changing majors).

Among their jobs as youths:

4 were paperboys

3 worked at

McDonald's

3 were camp

counselors

15 were terrible at math when growing up;

14 are terrible at math today.

"The first visit to the campus newspaper sealed my fate. It was a way to get some recognition."

"I knew instantly that this was what I was supposed to do the second I felt the energy and excitement of the newsroom."

Notably, five of the 20 did not decide on newspapering as a vocation until well into their 20s, three of them after having spent time in other lines of work and then returning to school for masters degrees in journalism.

Whatever their majors, these were not, for the most part, standouts, in terms of either academics or activities. Most were marginal college students at best, graduating with GPAs of 2.5 or so. Some were worse. At the other end of the scale, six did very well in college (including one Phi Beta Kappa and one Magna Cum Laude) and four received masters degrees in journalism.

And only eight had any experience at a daily or weekly paper—through internships or summer jobs—before landing their first full-time newspaper jobs.

Interestingly, three of these reporters were actively discouraged from careers in journalism, either by college professors or early editors. One, a female, was asked to choose a major other than journalism because, her journalism instructor told her, she would no doubt drop out of the business to have babies so she should not take up a slot that should go to a serious (male) student. Two others were encouraged to find other lines of work because their newspapering skills, they were told, were quite limited.

OBSERVATIONS

Half of these top-performing reporters probably could not get a newspaper job if they were just starting out today. Two did not graduate from college, one got a degree only after he had worked for a newspaper for a time, and most of them who did manage to eke through college did so without distinguishing themselves academically.

And yet they excel today.

This is consistent with what many researchers have found. Academic excellence is not necessarily a strong predictor of job excellence. As one reporter explained his transformation from college ne'er-do-well to hard-working reporter, "College wasn't real work, it was theory, it was grades. But (reporting) was real life. It was important. It was something I could commit to, live inside." It is also notable that only 10 had journalism degrees and fewer than that—eight—had anything resembling an internship before entering the business. Internships were a rarer phenomenon when most of these journalists were starting out, to be sure, but it is interesting that with merely average grades and little hands-on experience, these reporters managed not only to land jobs in the business, but to blossom quickly. Two reporters explain it up this way:

"We've managed to convince ourselves in recent years that only people with stellar educational backgrounds and internships beginning at age 11 can make it in newspapers. Of course, that's ridiculous. "

*"One **of** my first editors said, 'It ain't brain surgery. Just find the facts and write as quickly and clearly as possible.' That is something **of** an oversimplification, but not far off the mark. You've got to be curious, willing to work hard, think logically and be able to write in a clear **if** not elegant way. If you've got those capabilities, you can master it. "*

Still, it is difficult to imagine what their first editors saw in most of this motley group when they were in their twenties.

The one obvious thing most of them had going for them was a strong history of hard work (their college grades notwithstanding). Most had, in their growing-up years, an amazing series of jobs well beyond the usual babysitting, yard work and paper boy gigs. All but three worked in high school, not only during the summers, but often part-time after school. And all but two worked their way through college. Their jobs were of the decidedly non-glamorous sort:

gravedigger, cheesemaker, construction crew, store clerk, janitor, theater usher, tomato factory line worker, waiter or waitress, selling corn at a roadside stand.

They entered the work world with a strong work ethic. And to this day they express the sort of 1950s and '60s bedrock conviction that one simply does not cheat the boss. In fact, 17 of the 20 reporters observed that they feel the need to give a good day's work for a good day's pay, even though they were never asked a question during the interviews specifically related to that, or likely to prompt such a statement. For these reporters, work has intrinsic value. "If I won the Lotto tomorrow I would still work," said one. "It is the way I self actualize." And while they are pleased they managed to land in a line of work which suits them well and mostly gives them pleasure, most recognize they would probably work equally hard and aim equally high whatever their vocation. "If I were a maker of chairs, I would want to make the best chairs that could be made," said one.

One thing that would not have been obvious to their early editors, but which should not be overlooked in the aggregate, is the remarkable pattern of early childhood difficulties. These are people who did not fold when facing rather extraordinary life events in youth. Nearly all of the 11 reporters who faced those events describe their childhoods as normal and present those particular events matter-of-factly with no special emphasis or intonation, viewing them, at least in hindsight, as simply challenges to be dealt with. It is quite likely, however, that confronting these sorts of events in childhood left them with a strong sense of self-reliance, a high level of confidence in their own ability to deal with adversity and a fair measure of empathy for others.

Finally, it is clear that for many of them, journalism provided a refuge of sorts. For the more than half of them who were (and are) shy or socially unassertive, newspaper work presented a launch pad for reinventing themselves. Protected by the shielding cloak of "reporter," they could safely venture into territories they would not otherwise be inclined to experience and to develop in ways they are not naturally predisposed

to explore. And for many of those who were not and are not shy (as well as many of those who are), newspaper work provided an alluring conduit up and away from their roots. It was honest, respectable work, as their fathers had been engaged in, but with more flair and, they no doubt hoped, with less risk of becoming nothing more than sheer drudgery. As one reporter observed, "Journalism pulled me out of everything I would have been."

Their Careers

In the years since these journalists entered the business, they have had widely disparate experiences and evolved in widely disparate ways.

Four have spent their entire newspaper careers at the same paper. Of the remaining 16, five worked at one other news organization before joining the newspaper that currently employs them, five at two others, four at three others, one at four others, and one at eight others (including several locations within the same wire service organization). Four worked at jobs or careers other than the newspaper industry before becoming a newspaper reporter; one dropped out of the profession then re-entered.

Most have married, a few have divorced, most have raised families and, over the years, they all have pounded out thousands of stories, big and small. A couple have served in foreign bureaus, five are working on the hometown paper they grew up reading. A couple have won Pulitzers, several have won other significant national awards and a few disdain the very notion of awards. Some have given serious thought to leaving the business, most can't imagine a worklife outside a newsroom. Some take a rather global view of their trade, keeping abreast of industry trends, issues and machinations; others focus almost exclusively on their own newsrooms.

Despite their very different paths, their careers have not been without similarities.

Most of them came of age in newspapering during the '60s and '70s, and they have similar early-years recollections

of a time when editors were straight-talkers, the mission was rock-solid and standards and parameters were clear. Although all 20 reporters say they have received very little guidance or feedback through most of their careers, virtually all remember early-year dressing-downs, firmly stated expectations and long lunch hours as editors hauled them through town, force-feeding familiarization with the local scene and imbuing them with the ability to recognize subtle changes and potential stories. Most recall editing sessions peppered with passionately delivered editor admonitions that will remain with them until they write their last stories.

"Never be late, never be wrong. "

"Don't tell your readers, show them. "

"If the reader wants it, that's what you've got to get."

"Get that copy in. This ain't no seed catalog."

"Get out there, boy, and spin your yarn the best you've ever done."

"Don't vague it up."

"It doesn't matter what you think is on the record. The only thing that matters is what your source thinks is on the record."

"Remember: Stiletto, not meat ax."

"The only bad question is the one you didn't ask."

"Concise, concise, concise. "

As the years went on, there were some similar events in their careers. A significant proportion—14 of the 20—served in a management or editing position and two of those who did not manage or edit have worked on the copy desk. Half had bureau or wire experience at some point in their careers.

Seventeen of the 20 have worked in more than one department. All of the features reporters have worked in news, as have many of the sports reporters. Most of the news reporters have had experience in features, sports, projects or business.

Most went into newspaper work, and stayed in newspaper work with no fixed plan regarding their futures. The vast majority—17—have never had a career path in mind. That was not, in most cases, merely a lapse of planning but a consciously arrived-at mindset. Several reporters commented that they have always believed fixating on the future would prevent them from doing their best work in the present; others said having a rigid track might have prevented them from seizing opportunities. In any case, all were motivated to take assignments or jobs because those opportunities were interesting, not because they seemed likely to lead to some boost in prestige or power. Among the three reporters who did have some primitive version of a career track in their heads early in their careers, the planning centered mostly on beats they would ultimately like to capture or larger newspapers they hoped someday to reach. And they have developed some similar work habits over the years.

Most are not workaholics today (although they certainly leaned in that direction during the early years of their careers). They believe they have learned to work smarter over time, and 16 of them work 50 hours a week or less (eight of those 16 work 40 to 44 hours a week).

"I will do whatever it takes to get the job done, but I don't spend every waking hour at work."

"I try hard to follow the advice once given me: "Don't let the job be your life, let it be part of your life. "

"I work hard but not long."

And most, having borne witness to the horrors of burnout, and, in fact, teetered on the edge of it themselves

Half have never had any professional training since entering the business, except for in-house seminars.

more than once, have developed personal practices to keep it at bay. Five are relentless about changing jobs or beats regularly; five constantly seek new approaches or styles or ways of doing their jobs or demand the occasional story off their beats; four depend on outside interests such as exercise, reading, freelance work or sabbaticals; and one parcels out his free time to coincide with the periods he's most likely to feel strung out. Two are not conscious of taking any special anti-burnout precautions and three refuse to acknowledge burnout as anything other than the ultimate exercise in self-absorption or a handy excuse for bad performance.

"Burnout is a very ego-centered concept."

"I don't buy burnout. I don't understand what it could be. If it's there, it's because people are spending too much time on the negatives and no time on improving the situation, which, of course, is the lazy way out."

"Burnout is usually work avoidance. And the key to getting past it is to simply do the work. Make the first phone call, write the first paragraph."

There are also some career-related attitudinal similarities among these reporters when their work histories are examined. These are, for the most part, action-oriented people, people who don't wait for things to happen but who make things happen. And they're willing to take some risk. "It's easier to get forgiveness than permission, so you just move," said one reporter. There is evidence of this action orientation throughout their worklives. This is a group that, for the most part, has consistently created or seized opportunities, and having done so, expands the scope of those opportunities. Moreover, they have often taken lateral moves in order to learn additional skills and they have frequently accepted jobs they feared because they sensed those jobs would stretch them professionally. Several have taken computer training or other courses on their own time; many have actively positioned themselves to work for particular editors because those editors while demanding and sometimes difficult, were known to push

reporters to higher levels; nearly half worked weekends or evenings on unassigned stories early in their careers to prove themselves to editors; and several submit a list every year of things they would be interested in pursuing at the paper. Many of them carry notebooks everywhere to jot down notes from overheard conversations in the supermarket, sights seen while driving around and snippets from radio and TV. Most of them have put their editors on notice that they want to be called when there's a breaking story (not on their beat) at 2 a.m. and when they're overlooked, they'll try their best to horn in on big stories (content with even a routine piece of it). And while most newspaper people talk regularly about that book they'll write or that freelance business they want to develop,

many of these people have managed to pull it off. Of the 20, five have written books, one is currently writing a book and one has just signed a contract for a book. Four have active freelance businesses.

Second, they are disarmingly honest about their various shortcomings. They don't delude themselves—or attempt to delude anyone else—about their professional deficiencies. "I have seen and worked with superstars and I'm not one, not even close. Others' brains work at a higher speed than mine," one declared. "There are various levels of doing a good job. I don't often manage to get to the top one," another offered. Nineteen of the 20 instantly identified two or three professional

shortcomings when asked to name one and 16 had already mentioned two or three before they were asked to identify any. Moreover, 15 of the 20 have strategies for overcoming those shortcomings, not because an editor suggested they do so, but because they want to improve.

Third, they do not wallow. They have as many complaints, disappointments and criticisms as other reporters, but 18 of the 20 said they push themselves to get beyond the neg-

Asked to identify their three best professional characteristics, they offered these descriptors most often:

- Strong writing skills
- Strong work ethic
- Honest
- Accurate
- Adaptable
- Tenacious
- Responsible
- Knows area well
- Loyal
- Empathetic

atives as quickly as possible—a remarkable percentage given that they were asked no questions directly relating to this particular phenomenon. They don't waste a lot of energy chewing old issues, revisiting old disappointments or rehashing past slights. They control the things they can control, whine when they feel the need and then they move on. They see wallowing as a form of self-victimization which they refuse to engage in.

"Bitching and whining are cathartic. You need to do it to get it out. But then you leave it behind. You don't bring it up again and again."

"Hanging on to bad feelings takes too much psychic energy."

Finally, there are some internally generated characteristics worth noting.

They are very conscious of personal standards. Seventeen made reference to personal standards or pride, although they were never asked a question specifically related to that.

"I guess I probably have a strong measure of professional pride. Even if it's a crappy story I want it to be quality work, not a slipshod bunch of words put together to meet deadline. It's got my name on it. I want it to be the best it can be. "

"My standards for myself are higher than the editors' and I'm scared of their tolerance."

"It's my name, my credibility on the line and there's nothing more important than that. It's impossible to imagine a circumstance where you wouldn't do your best."

"I'm passionate about the obligation a journalist has to be ethical or be a watchdog to do the best story you can do. To exceed the basic objectives of fair, accurate and clear is something I always strive for. I don't always make it."

"It's my name out there. There are degrees of trying hard and I am disappointed when I don't go the limit. "

"I always have to do the best I can no matter what I'm doing. I don't always get there, but I always have to shoot for it."

"I'm never satisfied."

"Ever since I was little, whatever I did, I wanted to be the best."

"I have high personal standards."

"If I don't give something my absolute all, I feel I'm an abject failure. "

"The idea is to be as good as you can be at whatever you're best at. "

"I've always wanted to do things excellently and I try like hell every day."

"I've got my own responsibilities and my own pride, and I'll do whatever I need to do to make sure there isn't disappointment."

"You generally rise to the level of expectation. You can put that on yourself or someone else can put it on you. For me, it's often more of the latter. But it's great when someone else pushes... I have, by now, a reputation that's important to me. I wouldn't want to jeopardize that. I'd feel bad if I sloughed off."

"I always think I can do better on a story."

"I always feel pressed to do a little better... pressed by myself, not others."

"I'm very critical of what I'm working on at the moment. I always think it's not as good as it should be, that I really haven't gotten to the bottom of it. It's only later I can take some pride in my stories."

Part of the standards issue may be rooted in fear—fear of not living up to expectations (one's own or others'), fear of losing the edge, or, mostly, fear of being merely average.

Although they were not asked any single question that might have been expected to draw such responses, 10 reporters confessed to this thing that often gnaws at them, drives them to be better.

"I'm motivated by fear. I fear not being relevant or pertinent".

"The old slackers around here are walking examples of what I dread most, of what I desperately don't want to be when I get to be that age. Avoidance of that possibility drives me hard. "

"I don't take anything for granted. I figure I have to prove myself everyday. If I'm not worthy, where will I be?"

"My lack of self-confidence drives me. I don't want to be found unworthy."

"Nothing's forever any more. So you can't get sloppy or lazy."

"I have to keep proving myself every day. To myself and to others."

"I have fear of failure. I simply can not let it happen."

"Feeling guilty makes me do what I have to do: guilty that I'm not as good or as valuable as they think I am, guilty that this story isn't all it should be."

"I'm panicked because my career ends in a few years. I want to be really good in the years I've got left. I don't ever want anyone to say, 'He used to be good.' I'm running out of time. I've got to make my final years count."

"I'm sometimes troubled, I sometimes lose sleep. No matter how conscientious you are, you can make a mistake. What did I take for granted? What call should I have made?"

And there is relatively widespread acknowledgment of insecurity. Eleven of these highly acclaimed, much-awarded reporters made reference to this is a given in their professional lives, again, without prompting from the interviewer.

"We're a bundle of exposed nerve endings. I'm still awfully insecure about what I do. I need reaffirmation...No matter how good you think you are, no matter how much you think you're improving, you're still going to have days when you look at that blank screen and wonder if you can pull it off. "

"I'm just as tortured as the next guy. I tend to be very self-critical."

"No matter how well I have a story nailed, I still go through panic. "

"I do a check regularly. I ask an editor if you think I'm losing it, or not contributing, you must tell me."

"I am driven, too obsessive and too sensitive because I'm not sure, even now, that I've done it right, that I haven't overlooked something or assumed something or been stupidly arrogant."

"I'm worried. It's one of the things that define me. Worried about someone finding out that I'm not really all that good. I work really hard to try to make sure that doesn't happen. "

"You can never think you've got it made. Because something's gonna happen that you're not sure how to handle or how to approach or how to pull it off."

"I often take a good hard look at what other people out there are doing, and compare it to mine. I need to know if I still measure up."

"The insecurity seed is always there, threatening to take root. Is this really a good story? Have I done my best by it?"

"I'm miserable at this moment because I don't think I've been doing very well in the last six months."

"Insecurity is a given. I still wonder if I know what I'm doing."

Observations

The similarities in their worklives—the high proportion who have served at least temporarily in management or editing or copyediting positions, the large number with bureau or wire service experience—can not be overstated. It is quite unlikely that any randomly selected group of reporters would have such a high proportion of former editors and it is probable that these top performers are top performers at least in part because of this experience.

Virtually all acknowledge that visiting the other side was valuable and probably contributed much to where they are today, on one or several levels: it helped sharpen their skills; it gave them an other-side view of how the system works (knowledge they use to its fullest now that they are back in the reporting corps); and it offered a sometimes shocking introduction to the sorry state of the copy their colleagues sometimes turn in, a lesson which led to redoubled determination to produce high quality copy. Also, having already achieved the level to which many reporters aspire, they waste no psychic energy wondering if they will ever be invited into management's inner sanctum. Interestingly, not one of the reporters who has already had management experience would ever return to what some of them refer to as "the bowels of middle management," (although two might consider a stint in editing if allowed to simply work with reporters and not have to contend with meetings or administrative tasks).

17 make suggestions to other departments regularly; the remaining three comment:

- We're not set up for that. They (editors) get their agendas set and don't want intrusion.
- It's a little tricky. Some people don't want to hear.
- Not possible. Story suggestions fall into a black hole.

They also no doubt got similar boosts (in skill and mindset adjustments) through working in several different departments for several different editors. Such experience prepared them to acclimate to nuances in approach, style and presentation, and equipped them to be more adaptive to larger change.

It is also not mere happenstance that most of these reporters are action-oriented people who take control of their own careers. In their action orientation, their refusal to wallow and their clear resolution to identify and address their own shortcomings and chart their own courses, they demonstrate a proclivity for what psychologists refer to as "internal locus of control." People who live in this sphere operate under the notion that they are largely that they are largely masters of their own fate, that they can control most things and when they can't control them they can modify them or act in ways

or act in ways that lessen the negative impact.

It is a fundamental conviction that not only impacts their actions but imprints their thinking.

"If you get to the end of the year, and your body of work is not all you intended or wanted it to be, you have no one to blame but yourself."

Their Reactions to Change Directives

- I don't embrace it all but I listen.
- You don't always agree, but you don't waste a lot of time screaming about it.
- If it's a matter of principle or what journalism is supposed to do, I'm not going to change. If it's a matter of how information is presented, I'm willing.
- I can get with the program. But I don't go against journalism principles.
- I accommodate the things I need to accommodate. I've gotten better because of it.
- I'm good at listening to what their needs are and then coming up with my own ways of meeting them.
- Sometimes I disagree, but the boss is the boss.
- I don't like some change but I know how to roll with it.
- I adapt. I make it work. Newspapers, like everything else, go through cycles.
- I attempt to go with the flow. You're in the army you don't get to make the rules.
- We have to respond to the community but we sometimes do it in very weird ways.
- Sometimes I respond reluctantly, sometimes cheerfully. Sometimes we take change too far, become too doctrinaire.

"When I get kicked in the face and I get down, I ask myself, Am I going to let myself be like this, or am I going to recover and find a new way to get at it?' I try to put things into perspective or I try to adapt so I can find the situation challenging rather than cave in to frustration."

The opposite of this type are those who operate under "external locus of control," which is to say they believe outside forces control their lives—things will happen, often bad things, and they simply have to accept that. They are the kind of people who are often flummoxed by hardship and flattened, at least temporarily, by disappointment.

Finally, on the issues of fear and insecurity, it is important to point out that these are emotions that serve to motivate these particular people, not paralyze them. There is much in the research literature that suggests that top performers in all walks share similar feelings and there is some belief that this is particularly true among those who work in creative fields, where performance assessment is quite subjective. Obviously, it takes a fair measure of resolve to traverse these two potentially damaging emotions. The benefits of regular positive reinforcement from management are invaluable.

The Reporter's-Eye-View of Newsroom Life

From their perch of longevity, these reporters have witnessed and concluded much. Reporters are never at a loss in the observation and advice department and these are no exception.

They've had good and bad bosses over the years and have become adept at isolating and identifying the characteristics of both. Asked to name the qualities and characteristics of the best bosses, they provided more than 30 descriptors. The 10 most frequently mentioned, in descending order, are:

Experienced enough and wise enough to know what it takes to do the story.

- Sets high standards
- Gives solid, regular feedback
- Is encouraging and supportive
- Can shape and communicate a vision
- Has strong communication skills
- Enthusiastic
- Honest and forthright
- Flexible
- Has a sense of humor

Their notions of the characteristics of the worst bosses:

- Inferior professional skills
- Offers insufficient positive reinforcement
- Dictates how to write stories based on preconceived notions of what the story is
- Insecure
- Believe their only role is to carry out orders from on high
- Control freaks
- Arrogant
- Unsympathetic, impersonal

Most, in fact, have quite a dim view of middle managers. Seventeen of them say most contemporary middle managers are more focused on professional ascension than on being journalists; are sorely lacking in people skills; have few journalistic convictions of their own, resulting in their becoming little more than yes men and women for upper management; and are prematurely promoted-long before they have sufficient experience and skills to be of much assistance to the reporters they oversee. Still, many of the reporters are at least somewhat sympathetic to middle management, the stratum of the newsroom they see as a netherworld without reward or power. Middle management, they say, has disintegrated into a miasma of copy pushers without authority as upper management calls all the shots.

"They're in a no-win situation. Top editors give them no respect and reporters don't either. "

"It's a really tough job because everybody's gunning for you."

"They have no real power. They are controlled like marionettes by the editors above them. "

While most of these reporters say they have good working relationships with the editors they report to, 16 of the 20 long to work for seasoned editors who will prod them, chal-

lence them and help them through the intricacies of issues and stories so they can continue to grow in their final years.

Half are frustrated that the level of their work today is very little changed from the level of their work some years ago.

The 20 reporters see many other problems in their newsrooms: insufficient feedback (cited by 11 of them); top managements that have not communicated a clear vision (cited by eight); insufficient training (cited by seven); insufficient staffing (seven); aloof, out-of-touch top editors (six); too much negativism among the staff (six); local coverage initiatives dictated by corporate offices hundreds of miles away (six).

But the single-most prevalent theme is concern that in the zeal to be better,

more appealing and more competitive, editors are emphasizing presentation to the virtual exclusion of attention to content. Most of these reporters have adapted fairly well to the shifting tides and acknowledge that in many ways change has improved newspapers and their own work. But 17 of them are distressed by what they see as declining evidence that editors place enough value on the basics of balance, completeness, fairness and journalistic integrity.

18 say they get little or no feedback or criticism

- I kind of wish I got dragged over the coals more.
- I don't get enough, good or bad. I especially wish they'd say it directly when they're disappointed.
- I like it at the right time with the right tone. I want the same respect I give them.
- There isn't enough time in the day for anyone to worry about that.
- Most is electronic. But a lot of it is so routine it is almost devalued.
- We're way too kind to each other, not honest enough. I have a few friends who are really candid about my work and I need that.
- I never know how I'm doing.
- I love an editor who can duke it out over a story. I'm not challenged enough in the editing process.
- No one is ever beyond constructive criticism.
- I need to be told if I have an accurate self image.
- Strong reporters, especially, don't get enough. The editors have this thinking that "It's his job to be good," so you never hear a word.
- I like collaboration. I try to make editors feel free to say what they think, but most feel overwhelmed and overworked so if you're decent they leave you alone.

"Journalism has taken a back seat to presentation and the obsession with synergy-synergy with TV, synergy with other departments. That lets everyone think cheaply about stories."

"The business of news-gathering is too often driven now by entertainment value."

Part of their concern is fueled by recognizing over the years that situations and issues are rarely as cut and dried as the stories they write about them, that the "complete" story is usually a mass of discontinuity which defies the linear, simplistic story-telling most editors insist upon. Twelve of the reporters express frustration at editors' disinterest in exploring the subtleties and the nuances and providing the various shades of gray. Some of their comments:

"We rarely tell the complete story. The limitations, the way we do things result in our not shedding full light."

"Stories are rarely black and white. They're almost always gray. And journalists are often pushed to present only the extreme edges, not the various shadings that provide the complete picture."

"Journalism oversimplifies almost everything. At some point you really want to tell things as they really are without ignoring or downplaying the nuances."

"What I write every day is a true story, but it's not the full story."

The second most prevalent theme revolves around recognition. It is the single most craved and the single most-appreciated act in newsrooms, even among crusty long-timers. "Nobody's ever said to me 'you're a valued reporter, what can we do to help you?'" said one reporter. "It's pathetic, I know, but I live for that rare slap on the shoulder when I've done a good story," said another. When reporters were asked three

questions. What is the best thing management ever did for you? What is the best reward you ever got? And what means the most to you?—recognition-related answers were given 48 times out of the 60 possibilities. And more than half of those 48 answers were along the lines of "An editor (or colleague) saying, 'Really nice story.'"

Money as a reward, gesture or an expression of appreciation came up only three times.

For most, in fact, salary is not an issue. Asked directly about money matters, 15 say they always appreciate more but they realized going into this line of work that they would never become rich, and at this point, many of them say, they are earning far more than they ever anticipated. For five, however, money is something of an issue, having to do mostly with equity concerns—poor performers getting the same raises as strong performers, for example, and new hires earning more than long-timers.

The third most-often-expressed concern relates to the current generation of younger reporters. Many believe younger reporters are somewhat smarter and better educated than when they themselves were starting out, but most worry that most young reporters are afflicted with one or several shortcomings: They are not sufficiently curious; they have no allegiance to the profession; they don't read newspapers, including the one they work for; they are excessively interested in seeking personal fame; and their work ethic isn't strong enough. Furthermore, they are worried that these reporters are receiving little or no help in overcoming these shortcomings.

"No one's monitoring them the way we were watched."

"I get so frustrated when I see them making the same kinds of mistakes day after day, the kinds that could be corrected with minimal attention."

17 have little or no contact or communication with upper management; 15 don't have a clear sense of the editor's vision.

- I get filtered information.
- I don't have a clear sense at all. I'd like to know stuff. We're not always privy to his thinking.
- I know what I need to know: the bottom line is profit.
- The vision is very murky.

Still, whatever their complaints or concerns, three-quarters of the reporters have trouble imagining themselves in any other line of work. Although fully half have given serious consideration to leaving the business at some point (one did, then returned), most

Random musing on middle managers

"Upper management should start evaluating managers on additional factors like morale, motivation and positive reinforcement."

"Middle managers can stunt growth. So be careful whom you promote."

"The person you work for is as bad as you let them be."

"Strong editors have never been a strong suit around here. They don't have any training, they were not necessarily the strongest reporters, they don't respect employees, they're not flexible enough."

"I know so many people who were 'great people' when they were reporters who became 'assholes' when they became editors. That's not true, of course. It's the role that creates that impression."

are hooked by what one reporter called "the narcotic effect" of newspapering.

They give many reasons for this, a few of them quite lofty. But in the end, the allure could not be more simple.

They think working for a newspaper is fun.

Fourteen of them, when asked what motivates them to go to work every day, seemed perplexed by this question, and finally offered answers like, "Well, I just enjoy it," or "It's the most fun I can think of," or "It's just a really fun way to make a living." Many of them (six) confess they still get something of a thrill when they see their byline in the paper;

many of them (11) can't wait to get to the office in the morning when they're working on a good story; and many of them (eight) appreciate the fact that newspaper offices are less rigid than most work environments. In the end, it's a job that seems special. Said one:

"Everybody's out there living life, and for most it's pretty tedious. But journalism is doing something different every day. We live life in a magnified way to some extent."

OBSERVATIONS

Many of these reporters are quite wistful about the bye-gone days of journalism.

It is not at all uncommon for any group of people to remember their younger years as better years, but with many of these reporters, it seems to go beyond that. They recall a time when professional values were shared, obvious and unquestioned; when newsroom discussions focused on content; when editors would resign rather than co-opt their own journalistic integrity; when there was a fervor about the craft. Many of the reporters commented that the interview for this project was the first time in years they had discussed with anyone such newspaper basics as balance and fairness and ledes and story-telling.

There are polar transformations in all lines of work when one examines a 20- or 30- or 40-year span, as with these reporters. But when core values remain the same, as has largely been the case in newspaper work, it is worth management's time to reiterate them and give attention to them to ensure that they are not mutated beyond recognition or simply overlooked in the swirl of change. Leveling the balance—by adjusting the volume of the discussions about both content and presentation—would do much to reassure reporters that the basic tenants still count ... if, in fact, they do.

Equally thorny are some of the other issues they raise. The high level of disdain for middle managers is particularly troubling, even when tempered with the obvious—that reporters have often, and historically, seen their relationships with editors as adversarial in nature.

What is quite obvious is that most older reporters not only want, but need, strong, seasoned editors.

Conventional wisdom says that senior reporters need the least direction and hand-holding, that they will manage to pull off good stories without a great deal of assistance and therefore, they can survive working for inexperienced editors. In a sense, that is true. But in the long haul, the older reporters, especially the good ones for whom a sense of progression is extremely important, need the best, the most challenging editors in order to keep their spirit, freshness and drive when they tackle their 900th story, or when

they look ahead and see 900 more. They have outgrown the thrill of simply mastering the basics but not the passion for scaling greater heights. And it is unlikely that even the most promising young editor can do much to assist these people in finding ways to plumb nuances, to explore the delicate branches just out of reach or to communicate in new and different ways.

Left on their own, without challenging encouragement from strong editors, these 20 reporters, and others like them, will probably find ways to maintain their current levels of excellence. But that will not bring them much professional pleasure, and at some point they may find it increasingly difficult to self-motivate.

As for less performance-minded post-40 reporters, the thousands of them who probably represent the majority of older reporters in U.S. newsrooms, the renewed sense of challenge that will extract them from the jaws of burnout is most likely to come from seasoned editors as well.

The 20 reporters raise some other interesting concerns that most newsrooms would do well to reflect upon, the recognition issue perhaps key among them. Newsrooms are rarely wellsprings of positive reinforcement and strong performers usually get very little of the limited offering. Indeed, many studies have found that low performers often receive virtually all of managers' time, attention and reinforcement, not always with the hoped-for results. While it would be imprudent to remove attention from low performers, it can be equally unwise to fail to recognize the efforts of strong performers.

The Aging Issue

At this point in their careers, many of these reporters are becoming somewhat more focused on the reality of growing old-how it will affect what remains of their work-lives, how they will be viewed by their co-workers and how they will navigate the transition. Most-12-believe there is not a systemic bias against older reporters in their newsrooms, but eight say that while there is not an obvious pattern of discrimination, management at all levels is afflicted with an incipient, if unconscious, form of bias, evidenced mostly by silence, rewards not given and opportunities not granted.

"There's an assumption (older reporters) are all used up. Older people have to share in the responsibility for that. They are sometimes unwilling to adapt. A lot of times they bring problems on themselves, but not always. "

"There's a lack of respect for older reporters. They're guilty until proven innocent. The assumption is they don't want to do much, they don't want to progress, unless, somehow, they come up with some evidence to the contrary."

"There is bias to some degree. Management doesn't always make the most of their skills and experience. I have watched as older reporters here wound up on the copy desk or doing things not as important as they once did."

"There's a tendency in management to discount their skills."

"They view over-45 reporters as characters to be moved aside. We don't look very good on the actuarial charts. So (we're) sometimes shifted to outposts and eventually take buyouts."

"Older reporters don't get recognition for their efforts as much as younger ones and everyone needs positive reinforcement. Salary realignments always favor younger reporters, for example, and older reporters are low priority for training."

"There's less regard for older reporters. They're invisible."

"Whatever skills you have acquired are valued more marginally. I have more perspective and more skepticism and more wisdom that aren't highly valued."

Whether age bias exists in their own newsrooms or not, most of the reporters are concerned about how they will cope, perform or change as they grow older. Indeed, when asked to identify their greatest professional fear, 13 of them made reference to an aging-related concern.

*"I'm afraid **of** growing less sharp mentally."*

"I fear losing my drive as I grow older."

"I'm afraid someone will think I'm too old to do this, or that I'll write like an old, out-of-touch guy."

*"I'm afraid **of** overstaying my welcome."*

"I worry that what seems easy now, writing, is really a gift, and that gift may disappear. "

*"I'm afraid **of** being ignored or pushed aside."*

"I'm afraid I'll lose the edge."

*"I'm fearful **of** getting carpal tunnel or anything that would prevent my being able to write. Or losing any **of** my senses, or my mind."*

"I fear burnout now. It's a constant."

*"I'm scared **o f** reaching a point when I'm not happy doing this. What if I wake up one day and I'm 55 and I hate my job?"*

"I'm scared that I'll reach the point where I'll no longer be able to learn all the new tricks."

"I'm not finished yet, but time is running out. Can I accomplish everything I want before my time runs out? Do I have enough strong years ahead?"

*"I'm afraid **of** just not being able to do it any more, not performing very well."*

And most are growing increasingly aware of and concerned about the older reporters in their newsrooms who simply are not performing at a level that should be expected of someone with many years in the business. Ten of the reporters believe that only one-third or fewer of the over-40 reporters in their own newsrooms are performing at an appropriate level, adapting to change, and continuing to take pride in their work. Eight of the reporters set the number at about 50 percent. They are concerned about older slackers' impact on younger reporters and worried that everyone over 40 is perceptually tainted by the older low achievers.

"They slow the newsroom down, make it sluggish."

"It's particularly bad for the younger reporters. They can identify deadwood, people without fire for their jobs, and when they see it, their own enthusiasm is dampened. It's a drag."

"They bring everybody down."

"They give credence to the stereotype that older means less hard-working, less committed, and I resent that."

However, there is nothing approaching universal agreement regarding how the older slackers got to that point and how the matter should be addressed (although 18 of the 20 believe that steps should be taken to improve their performance).

Several of the 20 reporters point out with simple but absolute accuracy that some people just aren't very good reporters—no matter how long they've been in the business.

"Fact of life: some people are better at this than others. "

"Some people aren't a good fit."

"I don't know how much some of them really like writing and reporting. Some really are just not cut out to be newspaper people."

"Some people aren't suited to this line of work. Some don't have sufficient curiosity or they have tin ears. Some really don't enjoy people, some are lazy."

"Some have come to realize this isn't the career they thought it would be, but they're disinclined to switch."

Why unsuitables were allowed to stay in the business or not improve their skills is a mystery to most of the reporters, since, as many of them point out, it is generally quite clear within a matter of months if someone has what it takes to be a solid reporter. But those who are ill-suited may be the minority population of over-40 low-achievers. More prevalent, perhaps, is the older reporter who once showed promise and who has now switched over to cruise control. Here opinion diverges considerably. In the minds of three of the reporters, when this happens it is almost entirely the blame of the reporter.

"Some are happy to just get by."

"Some people are so sour about everything it clouds their ability to do things. Also, there are some people who just aren't self-starters. And at a certain point in a reporting career, editors quit hand-feeding you."

"They're bored, they're unhappy, and they allow themselves to be."

In the minds of three, it is almost exclusively the fault of management.

"It's almost entirely the environment. Some people just aren't well cared-for. There are injustices. Some have really been abused .If someone comes up to you every day and says, 'You're a bad person and I hate your work,' you dry up. "

"Some over-40 reporters have not been treated well and the wounds persist. I can't believe how badly some of them have been treated. Editorships pulled out from under them, made to be cub reporters again, placed in impossible beats. Some people have to make a living and they elect to stay. "

"There have been forced career changes that they don't understand or don't accept. Some are never asked their opinion about what they might do to be more valuable. There is the sense that certain people will get the good beats and stories no matter what. All of this contributes to a feeling that nothing they do will matter. Some people really have had some really bad things happen to them. Sometimes, as I look on, I can understand why it happens, but editors never fully explain it, never take the time, so the reporters themselves never fully understand and they descend."

Most believe it can be the fault of management, the fault of the reporter or a combination of the two.

"Some are casualties of bad management. Some are casualties of their own doing-they don't re-create themselves, they don't find new things to do, new subjects to get interested in."

"Each side has to take some responsibility for settling, for being satisfied with merely barely acceptable."

"Some have been beaten down, in fact. Some feel worn out because they've done the same story so many times. But that, of course, is the challenge. On a superficial level they have (done the same story), but that's a cop-out excuse. They need to be creative and flexible. Most of the slackers are not."

"Some are very lackadaisical. They've lost their fire. But in some cases, though not all, it is because they've been placed in positions where it's hard to perform well."

"I do tend to sometimes blame it all on management, When policies get implemented that make reporters think it's not worth it and there's not a system to support them, they can get lazy real fast. Many standard practices make reporters feel not worthwhile and not valued. Also, there is a lack of training and people skills among middle managers which can exacerbate situations. But I can't totally blame management. You need fire in your belly, passion for the work. And some people just don't have it."

There are many factors - internal and external - which can contribute to over-40 reporters being sub-par performers, the reporters say. Among them:

"Battle fatigue. "

"It's lots more fun to do something the first time than the 200th time."

"Some resent what they see as an emotionally-wearing job."

"The Hero-on-Wednesday, Bum-on-Friday management mentality begins to wear them down."

"They've always gotten by on the bare minimum and have no reason or motivation to change."

"There's a lot of mythology attached to reporters. Someone gets a reputation that they're not good and they can't outlive that. They realize they're not liked."

"Some have grown too cynical. They don't care any more."

"They've stopped feeling useful. "

"Some stayed in one job too long. "

"Some have changed their priorities in life. Work is now the fourth or fifth priority. "

"They're adequate and they're satisfied with just being adequate. Maybe no one has ever suggested that's inadequate."

"They were never self-starters and they aren't now, but the problem is that with their experience that deficiency is noticed more."

"Poor self worth. Maybe they tried to go someplace else and didn't get the job, or something like that, and they crinkle up. "

"If you're the focus o f management, if you're seen as a problem, and this goes on for some time, it can do a lot of damage to your spirit."

"You lose track o f the big picture."

"Work may not occupy the same place in their overall life as it does for some of the rest o f us."

Many of the 20 reporters made frequent reference to career disappointments and various mistreatments heaped upon sub-performing over-40s as explanation for their performance. Interestingly, much of the treatment they cite is no worse than they themselves have endured. Seventeen of the 20 have had more than passing personal experience with management misdeeds and career disappointments, some of it quite recent. But although they have managed to get beyond that, many of them are strongly empathetic to fellow reporters who have not. Still, 18 of the 20 believe something should be done to jumpstart the low-achievers (two others point out that all life is a bell curve and there should be no expectation that all people in any group will be strong performers or even average). And all believe nothing will be done.

"Both sides have got to want to do something about it. Managers have a lot of irons in the fire and I don't see reinvigorating reporters as anything approaching a priority."

"Some (low-performing reporters) are unpleasant, so management does nothing. The editors become co-conspirators."

"Some editors just don't want to tangle with them because they're difficult. "

"It's easier to stay stuck in the rut-easier for both sides."

While they acknowledge that improving the performance of older reporters could be a complicated and time-consuming process, they believe there are ways to reach them and improve their outlook and their performance. First, they say, management must talk to them. Most substandard reporters, they believe, have been allowed to under-perform in relative obscurity and safety for years, and have not been forced to face either honest assessment of their work or the harsh reality that more is expected.

"After a certain point, they lose touch with reality. They assume that if they still have their job, and no one's on their back, that they're doing OK. Not brilliantly, but certainly enough."

"Editors have got to be honest with them. Tell them they're not very good and tell them specifically what they have to do to get better. "

"Conversation is the most important thing. Estrangement is very painful, and that's where most of these people have lived for a long time. You have no information, so you make up your own."

Other suggestions:

- Give short-term reassignment.
- Ask them what it would take to get their enthusiasm back and try to accommodate that.
- Create an environment that fosters and demands quality from everyone of all ages.
- Give them goals slightly beyond their reach.
- Provide a developmental plan and give them training to master the skills they need to improve.

Most believe that if management has given a fair opportunity and enough coaching and sees no results, it is appropriate to reassign them to a non-news department within the organization or to end their employment.

"People should not occupy a seat they don't deserve after you've given them every opportunity. "

"Sometimes you need to counsel them into another line of work."

"You've got to carry your weight whatever your age."

"Jettison them."

*"Let's get rid **of** people who are losers or who just aren't newspaper people-whatever their ages."*

But two say that after a person has devoted 15 or 20 years or more to an organization, the organization would be wrong to fire him or her.

*"There should be some recognition **of** what these people have contributed over time. It's one thing to have aggressive reporters, but you also need people who know the place. "*

As troubled as they are by older slackers, they are similarly concerned about how management will adapt to and respond to aging reporters who are performing well. They believe that the contributions older reporters can provide—familiarity with the area, perspective, depth and breadth in reporting and writing, the ability to put things into historical context—are not valued as much as the act of writing fast and often. One of the roles they would like expanded as they age is that of senior adviser. Eighteen of the 20 expressed a growing inclination to reach out to other reporters, to share their knowledge, to leave their imprint on the next generation. They are flattered when younger reporters ask their assistance or guidance, or when management seeks their counsel about steps it is considering, and they often put in extra hours to fill this role. It is something that even the most driven of the reporters revels in, though most are a little bemused by and embarrassed over this turn of events. "For a long time I guarded what I picked up over the years; it gave me a competitive edge." said one. "Now I'll give it to anyone who'll take it." Evidently recognizing the craving among older reporters to have the Yoda mantle placed upon them, two of the papers in the study have made coaching younger reporters part of these senior reporters' job descriptions. Most of the 20 have begun to contemplate retirement. And only about half of them are pretty certain that when they retire, it will be from a newspaper. Ten say yes. Five figure it's possible or probable and five say they

probably will not retire from a paper. Comments from the latter five run the gamut:

"Teaching is probably a more viable option later."

"I think my days are numbered, not because they want to get rid of me, but because I may want to get rid of them. Though I am still passionate about what I do, I question my ability to relate to this next generation of editors. I will not stay until I'm bitter. There's no value to anyone if I do."

"I probably can't afford to retire from newspapers. "

"It's hard to imagine that I will be allowed to retire from the newspaper, that I'll be given that opportunity. They can get three reporters for what they're paying me now. "

"It's hard to imagine keeping this up for another 20 years, though it's hard to imagine what else I'd do."

OBSERVATIONS

Their fear of aging-focused primarily on the impact on their careers-should not be minimized. Redoubling recognition efforts will no doubt help allay their fears, as will management initiatives that demonstrate that older reporters are valued. When older reporters share the spotlight as often as younger ones and when they get the same number of slots for training as younger ones, there may be less ambient fear.

However, the reality is that as people age, most will experience some level of diminished functionality, and street reporting may ultimately not be feasible for some (though not all) 60-year-olds. It will be necessary to have outlets (other than the copy desk) for reporters if, and when, they reach the point that they are no longer up to certain tasks.

In the meantime, one of the issues most troubling to competent older reporters is the abundance of older reporters in their newsrooms who, while still fully functional, are doing the bare minimum to collect their checks. They're a drain on the organization and they're sending a powerful message to the rest of the staff that hard work and strong performance are not necessarily required. Moreover, they're stereotypical evidence that older means less hard-working or less competent.

With the growing number of older reporters in the workforce, there is the potential for a growing number of older non-performers in the years ahead. It is something newsroom management must confront. One rule of thumb that newsrooms might consider borrowing from other businesses is that non-performance or marginal performance will not be tolerated-at any age-and take steps to correct it. There is considerable evidence that older employees who have lapsed into below-standard performance or have never moved beyond barely acceptable performance are as responsive to coaching and intervention as younger employees ... provided they have the basic temperament, skills and training necessary required for their line of work. It is, therefore, appropriate and advisable to take steps to improve the performance of middle-agers.

Many will improve, some will not. And each organization must make its own decisions about how to deal with those who do not respond.

But a more fundamental issue exists and that is that many of the people who are not performing at age 45 also did not perform very well at age 25. It takes an enormously broad constellation of skills, abilities and interests to be a good reporter and many people do not possess a fraction of what they need.

Many, however, have been permitted to remain for years, even decades, in a profession ill-suited to them. When they were in their twenties and earning \$14,000 a year, it was not much of an issue; when they are in their forties, earning top money and covering important beats, it becomes one. The right and humane practice would be for editors to be much more observant and demanding of reporters early in their careers. Early intervention, even to the extent of counseling some would-be reporters into another line of

work, would reduce many of the quality and productivity issues that are currently plaguing newsrooms.

It is also vital to acknowledge the importance of recognition. No matter how many prizes these people have won, no matter how positively they affected their communities last week, it's today's story that dictates their sense of professional worth. When they receive little or no validation, that lends credence to growing concern that old has no place in newsrooms and that next week or next month, they will become invisible. One of the most potent and valued forms of recognition among this age group is being consulted, having other reporters and their bosses tap into their years of experience and expertise. They get great satisfaction from being able to pass on their accumulated wealth. This is a tendency that the aging literature has documented. Around the age of 40, it has been found, most professionals grow somewhat less focused on their own personal achievement and more focused on how they can share their knowledge, pass on something to others and leave their mark in a larger way. These reporters are no exception. They are equipped through experience to be mentors and guiding hands for others and they are emotionally inclined to do so. This may be one of their greatest contributions to their organizations... and to the industry.

Their Lives Outside the Business

These 20 reporters are less active in the community than might have been anticipated, given the shift at many newspapers toward greater community involvement. Fourteen have virtually no engagement in community organizations and activities, three have some—mostly through parents' groups in their kids' schools and through coaching—and three are quite active in community activities.

Their most consistent outlet is promoting journalism. Most—15—have become increasingly involved in journalism issues over the years and are regularly out and about speaking to journalism classes, serving as discussion leaders at API, Poynter or the Freedom Forum, doing presentations at SPJ, The National Writers Workshop and the like, or serving on freedom of the press committees, discussing issues on TV and speaking to civic groups.

Predictably, given the lack of involvement outside journalism, they are relatively insular in their social contacts. Nine have no friends outside journalism (or only a few), four have some friends outside the business and seven say most of their friends are outside the business.

Half acknowledge they do not have a balanced life. Some are making a conscious effort to even the balance, though with mixed success.

"I have to be very careful. I'd rather do more work than less."

"There have been sacrifices from what would be considered a normal life. But that is my life. I enjoy it."

"It is not balanced, and it's a bigger issue now, what with children and their expectations. I know it's not fair to my family, but I still want to do what I want to do, which is focus a lot on work. That's okay with me in my head, but not okay with my family, so it's not okay."

*"I miss out on a lot **of** things that other people experience."*

*"It's not particularly balanced. I know I have to have a lot **of** stimulation and that comes mostly from work. I like to have a lot **of** things up in the air."*

*"I do not have enough **of** a life outside the paper. "*

Half have been somewhat more successful in reaching something approaching acceptable equilibrium between work and life outside the newspaper world.

"I'm just as busy socially as I am professionally. That was not always true but over the years I have seen to it that has happened."

"I'm working on better balance. I want to develop more hobbies."

"I'm not there yet, but I'm working on it. This work takes a lot of your intellectual and emotional energy, and I've started doing things to move from no balance at all to some balance."

"I made a conscious decision that work couldn't be everything. And I work hard at living up to that. But at work I always feel I should be doing more, that I'm not doing all I should be. I haven't reached a happy medium."

"I'm much better now than in previous years."

"I put in a lot of hours, but I'm not consumed by my work. Family comes first."

"I'm very conscious of taking time for me."

"It is pretty balanced. At some cost to both home and work."

Whether they regard their lives as balanced or not, it is difficult to know where to draw the line between their personal life and their work life, if indeed there is a line at all. Most believe that much of their sense of identity is inextricably linked to being a journalist. Asked what percentage of them is what they do for a living, 15 said more than one half (and six of these said more than 75 percent); three said 35 percent or less; and two would not answer.

"My self-esteem is heavily tied to what I do."

"It defines who I am."

"It's very much like (John Le Carre's) The Honourable Schoolboy. Cut off from the umbilical cord of the organization, he was nothing. You take away my ties, my support system, and I am nothing."

"I realize a lot of how I am perceived is my work. My fit into my world is in large part

Most see retirement as a segue into more (if different) activity.

- There will never be no work.
- I see it as a chance to do other things, not just do nothing.
- I have never thought about retiring as a line between working and not working. I'll always write.
- I couldn't just sit in a fishing boat.

what I do for a living.”

“I’d be lost without this.”

“This is who I am. Work defines me to a very large degree.”

As a group, they're somewhat more religious than might have been anticipated, given the stereotypes about newsrooms. Four are very religious; seven have returned to prayer and/or church after a long lapse (often because they now have children) and many of them appear to be in something of a search mode, trying to figure out where they stand and what they want the future to be as it related to religion; eight do not attend church and do not regard themselves as religious or spiritual; and one is something of a Bible scholar, who makes frequent references to Bible teachings in his writing.

OBSERVATIONS

Despite the best efforts of many newspaper editors, few reporters have taken the leap from dispassionate observer to active participant. Possibly this group lived so long under the old rules of disengagement they find it difficult to change. More likely, however, is that most of them (and most other reporters) prefer disengagement as a lifestyle. They were attracted to newspapering and convinced to stay there largely because it was a way to know about things without being involved in things, it granted permission to stand on the sidelines and still make a contribution of sorts.

In any case, they have managed to excel in their profession and contribute to their papers without much in the way of community involvement or connectivity. Which raises the interesting question that newsrooms must explore in the years ahead: Is community involvement a requisite for all reporters? How much better would these reporters have been had they been less isolated and insulated?

Conclusion

From the many voices speaking, there are some clear themes that are worthy of discussion.

Perhaps the most obvious is that the needs of older reporters are in many ways the same as and in many ways very different from when they were first starting.

They still want great stories, they still want to be involved and respected and they still want to feel a sense of progression in their worklives. And for all their resolve and self-motivation, even the really good ones can't always pull that off single-handedly.

It is appealing to simply leave senior workers alone. It is unwise to do so. With their skills, maturity and experience they have the capacity to contribute far more in the next 10 years than they have in the last 10 years... if they are properly encouraged, directed and rewarded. Managements would do well to be aggressive about making the most of this segment of their human resources. And that can happen only when all levels of management gain a greater understanding about how to adapt to and with this growing population.

ABOUT...

About the Author

Sharon Peters spent 23 years in the newspaper business—as a reporter, editor and managing editor—before earning a PhD in organization development in 1994 and starting her own consulting firm. As a consultant, she has assisted newspapers with strategic planning, middle manager training, team building, and developing new performance review systems. She has also served as a writing and editing coach. An adjunct faculty member at Northwestern University, she has offices in Georgetown, Kentucky and Silverthorne, Colorado.