

## CULTURE FIT

# CXOs under 40 in demand at start-ups

**Start-ups looking for experience matched with how well recruits will fit in, say leading executive search firms**

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As security systems start-up searching for a chief financial officer told search firm Michael Page that it required a chief financial officer (CFO) not more than 35 years of age.

The reason? "Promoters felt that they themselves are quite young, so they specified the need for someone dynamic who would gel with the culture of the organization," said Nicolas Dumoulin, regional director of Michael Page India.

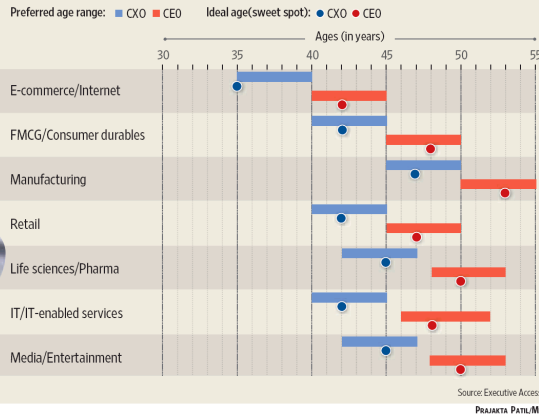
Requirements like these are becoming more commonplace as emerging companies look for relevant experience that is matched with how well the recruit will fit into an unstructured environment like that of a start-up.

And premium executive search companies such as Korn Ferry International, Executive Access India, Michael Page India and Egon Zehnder have been getting more such mandates in the past year.

When Urban Ladder Home Décor Solutions Pvt. Ltd was looking to hire a chief marketing officer (CMO), they knew they wanted someone who was below 40. "When we started looking for



## WHAT'S THE IDEAL AGE?



a CMO, we wanted someone with a minimum of 15 years of experience. Initially, when we started out we didn't see age as a criteria, but it became an important filter as we thought that people under 40 would be a better culture fit," said Geetika Mehta, director, human resources, at Urban Ladder.

The online furniture retailer hired 37-year-old Sanjay Gupta to be its CMO in February.

Navnit Singh, country head for India at executive search company Korn Ferry, said that about 50% of the start-ups they did business with in the last year asked for younger chief execu-

**Challenge for search firms is that there are few people who fit start-ups' specifications**

tive officers.

At Executive Access, too, managing director Ronesh Puri said about 70% of the searches they do for e-commerce companies are for people younger than 40.

Age is becoming more a point

of discussion now than it was five years ago, said search consultants.

"Young companies are becoming more and more particular about age, because they are using age as a proxy for energy," said Pallavi Kathuria, consultant with Egon Zehnder, adding that a majority of the searches they do for start-ups specify age as a criteria. She believes the early 40s is the sweet spot as people tend to be both seasoned and have the energy to keep up with the frantic pace at a start-up.

She believes the age specification comes from the fact that

managements want someone who will be able to spend at least five years with the firm and people in their early 40s tend to have a longer runway.

Also, in younger companies, Kathuria said, potential and elements that predict the future development of a leader are seen as a better marker of success than the number of years of experience.

"We look for at least 10 years of experience when we look to hire people in senior roles. And while age is not a direct filter, we have generally found the right fit between 30 and 40 for those roles," said Subra Krishnan, sen-

ior vice-president in charge of products at Vizury, an ad tech company.

He added that people older than 40 sometimes tend to have very specific expectations and they may not entirely be used to working in an unstructured environment, he said.

Someone under 40 would have had at least four role transitions and would have managed a chunk of business and still have a lot left to achieve, therefore becoming an ideal candidate for a chief executive's role, believes Debabratt Mishra, director at Hay Group India, a human resources consultancy.

"People in their 50s typically have seen a lot of success in their careers and tend to be less experimental," he added.

But the challenge here for search firms is that there are few people who fit this specification, making the search that much harder.

"The kind of experience, in product or design or technology leadership for example, that these young companies seek is very scarce and has come of age only in the last 7-10 years. Hence the demand for relevant younger leaders," said Kathuria.

Not just that, people well past their 40s may not even be interested in joining fledgling companies.

"We are a very young company, and very dynamic, so someone over 40 may not even want to join us in the first place," said Abhishek Bansal, co-founder and chief executive of Shadowfax, a year-old hyper-local logistics service provider.



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