

wyser

New Leaders

Young leaders are
reshaping the world
of work. Will you be
one of them?



A new era calling for a new type of leader

Being a leader used to be seen as a role for those in the second half of life, with CEOs and political leaders typically in their mid 50s to 70s. But that is changing. Today, growing numbers of companies, from start ups to multinationals, are run by leaders in their 40s, 30s and even 20s.

What are the reasons for this emerging trend? And what steps can you take to upskill and accelerate your career so that you can join the ranks of tomorrow's new leaders?

This report investigates the societal and economic shifts behind this emerging trend, reveals the skills businesses are looking for from their leaders and shares the insights and experiences of those spearheading this new movement.

Leadership isn't a given. It is always earned. So read on to discover how you can earn your leadership moment and take your company to new heights and in exciting new directions.



Why are our leaders getting younger?

“Young people own their title ‘the future’.
Young people are the future and this generation aren’t afraid to own that.”

Kate Bell, Director, DP Bell & Associates (Forbes, 12 April 2018)

Why are our leaders getting younger?

Globally

53% and **55%**
of men and of women

say they started
managing people
before the age of 30

(source: [Startus](#))

Today, there are examples across the world of young people leading political, social and economic movements and challenging the way 'things have always been done'. And increasingly, this trend is shifting into the boardrooms of the business world too...

Why are our leaders getting younger?

Here we explore some of the reasons why:



The rise of the tech entrepreneur

The emergence of hundreds of international tech founder CEOs has shown that it's possible to lead a multinational company in your 40s, 30s and 20s, with Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook), Ritesh Agarwal (OYO) and Evan Spiegel (Snap Inc) all famous examples.



Universities have become business hothouses

Tech has enabled young people to hone their talents, form businesses, build their brands and establish impressive networks before they've even left education, giving them a huge head start when they reach the business world. They're also getting increasing international exposure.

Slawomir Marek, HR Director for one of Europe's largest agricultural service providers, Tasomix, comments: *"Increasing numbers of young people have the opportunity to study at international universities and bring that experience of working with different people from diverse backgrounds into their work. Businesses are embracing the diversity of experience and open-mindedness these new leaders bring."*



Why are our leaders getting younger?



The all-pervasiveness of tech

Knowing how to use digital services and applications to engage with customers and gain data insights has become increasingly important and is an area in which younger leaders, who are digital natives, have a natural advantage.



Understanding of disruptive technologies

Disruptive technology and competitors are constantly changing the landscape in sectors like media, technology and retail. In these ever-changing sectors fast-track CEO pathways are prevalent, with the ability to stay ahead of the curve a prized asset in leaders:

‘Boards are reaching deeper into the companies they oversee to find executives who embrace disruptive technologies, have a proven track record of innovation, are confident global citizens, are able to operate in emerging and frontier markets and lead across diverse cultures.’

Harvard Business Review, 2014



Why are our leaders getting younger?



Pace of change

Technology is accelerating the pace of change and demanding overnight pivots in strategy and business direction. Against this restless backdrop decades of experience are no longer the ultimate quality prized in leaders:

“The characteristics for being successful have changed. Experience and knowing an industry and business processes inside out used to be critical, but the speed of change today and unpredictability of the world makes experience less of an important asset than adaptability.”

Luca Gatti, Senior Global Marketing & Communication Director, Gi Group Holding



Shift from process to people

“There has been a growing recognition in recent years that people are the most important assets to a company and that you need to look after them above all else. In many cases, younger leaders are more attuned to this shift, to the importance of working culture, of embracing diversity and of creating the conditions that enable people to be as efficient and effective as possible.”

Piotr Wajgielt, Executive Manager, Wyser



Young leaders paving the way around the world

Even in the political sphere, there are new frontiers being carved out by ever-younger leaders:

- **Sanna Marin**

became the world's youngest leader when she was inaugurated as Finland's Prime Minister at the age of 34. She is widely revered for her progressive policies and negotiating leadership and family life

- **Jacinda Arden**

was sworn in as Prime Minister and Leader of the Labour Party at the age of 37, in 2017 after a landslide victory and describes herself as a social democrat and progressive

- **Nayib Bukele**

was 37 when he came to power in El Salvador making him the youngest leader in Latin America. Known for his bold, fearless style, he has spearheaded a repressive anti-gang campaign across the country

- **Carlos Avarado Quesada**

served as President of Costa Rica from 2018 to 2022 and was just 38 at his inauguration. Prior to becoming President, he worked in business at Procter & Gamble before becoming social development minister





Across the world new leaders are challenging stereotypes of leadership and demonstrating that it is possible to successfully lead countries and companies in the first half of your life.

An exciting business age being forged by new leaders:

- **Stefan Larsson**
now CEO of PVH Corporation (which owns and licenses brands including Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein and Michael Kors), was made CEO of Ralph Lauren at 41
- **Hamilton Bennett**
was just 32 when she was promoted into her current role of Senior Director of Vaccine Access and Partnerships at Moderna
- **Satya Nadella**
became CEO of Microsoft in his 40s and has led the company through major changes including developing one of the largest cloud infrastructures in the world
- **KeyAnna Schmiedl**
37, is now VP of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Sustainability at Mozilla having previously been Global Head of Culture & Inclusion at Wayfair

New leaders tearing up the rulebook:

Today's new leaders are challenging the status quo and bringing in exciting new thinking, that is being adopted in boardrooms around the world:

- **Marissa Ann Mayer**
When Marissa Ann Mayer became CEO of Yahoo in her 30s she radically overhauled the working day, introducing hours of 7am to 7pm, to enable flexible working around lifestyles, years before it was an accepted concept
- **Brian Chesky**
co-founder and CEO of AirBnB, 41, is predicting that people will increasingly live as digital nomads in the future, working remotely from different countries, and is pivoting the Air BnB model to longer term stays to accommodate the trend. [Business Insider, 2020](#)

The skills today's leaders need are changing. Are yours fit for purpose?

As a global expert in search and selection for middle and senior management roles, at Wyser we meet with thousands of companies each year looking for bright emerging talent or wanting to recruit into senior leadership roles. In most cases, age doesn't factor as a requirement. What matters are the skills candidates bring, and these are shifting. Check out our skills pulse below to see if yours make the grade:

1

Process to people

New skill → Empathy

As more and more businesses come to recognise their people as their greatest asset, empathy is becoming a prized leadership quality. **Natalia Dernowska**, **HR Director for Hasco-Lek**, one of Poland's biggest Pharma companies, explains:

"The new style of management needs emotional intelligence as its driver. Business skills alone are no longer enough. They need to be coupled with people skills because everything falls out of having great people and a strong culture. People skills will also become increasingly coveted as AI develops. Business skills can be learnt but empathy can't and that makes it irreplaceable and valuable."

2

Greater unpredictability

New skill → Adaptability

The world is changing at pace and facing into huge challenges of climate change, economic upheaval and war. In these unpredictable times leadership styles have had to evolve to become more flexible with the ability to act nimbly and decisively coveted in today's leaders:

"Increasingly, because of all the uncertainty in the world right now, businesses are looking for leaders who are able to make intuitive decisions without having a full picture of the potential implications. Episodes like the Covid pandemic really brought home to businesses how important and rare that skill is."

Piotr Wajgielt, Wyser

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Accelerated pace of change

New skill → Curiosity

In a business landscape in which new entry competitors can become sector leaders within months, it has become essential for leaders to stay alert to emerging trends and to maintain a constant curiosity about the world around them:

“As well as all of the usual qualities such as resilience, flexibility and good communication skills I look for the ‘knife between the teeth’. You don’t always see that hunger for growing and knowledge, but it’s so important. It’s the only way to stay ahead in today’s ultra competitive landscape.”

Luca Gatti, Gi Group Holding

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Rapidly shifting working cultures

New skill → Open mindedness

Recruitment specialist, Piotr Wajgielt from Wyser, explains:

“Working life has changed unrecognisably over the past few years and new leaders have to be open to new ways of doing things and to creating working cultures that promote a healthy work / life balance.”

Luca Gatti elaborates:

“New leaders need to be open to flexible ways of working and to pushing that approach as far as it needs to go. I don’t expect my team to respect rigid timetables. I care that they are happy and perform. It’s about the results, not how they get there.”

5

Greater focus on ethics

New skill → Clear vision

With an increasing focus on corporate social responsibility and ethics, leaders need to be more mindful than ever of their organisation’s impact at every touchpoint as **HR Director Slawomir Marek** explains:

“Leaders need to be able to clearly and concisely articulate a vision that can build belief and drive people forward through uncertainty. They have to live their values and be prepared to make tough decisions to uphold them.”

At Wyser we recognise the importance of assessing an individual’s complete package of soft and hard skills and use a High Performance Trait Indicator to measure for key elements of a candidate’s personality considered vital to delivering at consistently high standards. Personality traits measured include ambiguity acceptance, curiosity and adjustment as well as competitiveness, conscientiousness and risk approach.



What I learnt along the way: Powerful insights from six new leaders



Luca Gatti

38, is Senior Global Marketing & Communication Director of Gi Group Holding, one of the world's leading providers of HR and recruitment services

Put yourself in situations where you are not the smartest in the room. The minute you are the smartest is the time to get out. Whenever you stop learning, it's time to change.

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Choose your first jobs not by salary or perks, but by your manager and the people you'll be surrounded by. Being with peers who inspire you is the single most important factor. What you learn in the early stages of your career will stay with you forever.

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Try to get international experience – the more diverse your experience is, the more it will enrich what you can offer. Getting out of your comfort zone and showing that you're happy to do that, immediately puts you ahead of the pack, as fewer and fewer people are willing to do that.



Natalia Dernowska

30, is HR Director for Hasco-Lek, one of Poland's biggest Pharma companies

Take care of your people because if you do, they will take care of your business.

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Spending time with the Board is essential but you can't lose touch with what's going on around you otherwise you won't make the right decisions. One-to-one meetings are a valuable chance to give and receive feedback, to demonstrate that you care and to continually learn from those around you.

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Embracing partnership strategies in leadership can be so effective, with experienced leaders giving younger leaders the benefit of their decades of knowledge and younger leaders supporting experienced leaders to adopt new technologies and managerial styles. When it's done right, intergenerational leadership can be a huge win-win.



Slawomir Marek

36, is HR Director for Tasomix FF Group, Europe's market leader in animal feed

Time management is probably the most overlooked skill. You can buy most commodities but you can't buy time, so the ability to manage your time well, and work well under pressure makes you invaluable to an organisation and will always help you stand out.

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Grab every opportunity to learn. It's said that people entering the labour market in 2030 will need to be reskill on average six times in their career. Being open to learning and seeing that as an opportunity to embrace will set you apart from the competition.

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Demonstrate high standards – don't just demand them. You have to hold yourself accountable to the same bar you're expecting of those around you.

What I learnt along the way: Powerful insights from six new leaders



Piotr Wajgielt

33, is an Executive Manager with Wyser, a global Search & Selection player for middle and senior management profiles

As a leader you can't be afraid of failure because in many cases the best leaders haven't exclusively enjoyed success. They've experienced failures but taken those and learnt from them.

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Be authentic. Play to your strengths and be honest about what those are, otherwise ultimately you won't be happy in your role.

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As a young leader you need to be able to demonstrate that you are MORE. More ambitious. More curious. More determined than average. Because ultimately it boils down to hard work and hunger to achieve.

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Be open to ideas from all your people because often the best ideas don't come from the top down but from the bottom up.



Elena Meotto

38, HR Director for Armando Testa Group, the largest Italian communications group in the world

Becoming a leader means you will change the destiny of people who work with you.

However, you must put extra care not just into the things you say, but also in the way you communicate. It's an enormous responsibility, which can lead to a positive outcome when people believe in you and the vision you can convey.

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It is also important to cross paths with as many different people as possible. Your future co-workers and subordinates will come from diverse backgrounds, so this is the only way to learn how to collaborate with them.

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Being approachable is a crucial quality for today's leaders: if you cannot engage people and make them feel like their contribution matters, they will leave.



Eloisa Siclari

35, Global Marketing Director for Zalando, Europe's leading online platform for fashion and lifestyle

Grit is what will always set you apart. Of course, you want to be great at what to do, but it's not enough: keep learning and taking on new projects, even the bold and 'risky' ones, as they will grant you access to new skills and opportunities.

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Listening skills are becoming increasingly rare. I strive to ensure I listen to my teams, remove obstacles and roadblocks for them, advocate for their ideas in meetings, and facilitate internal networking between different departments.

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When you start a new role, build your reputation by asking the right questions and actively listening to the answers. When your contribution is based on a strong understanding of the company, people acknowledge what you bring to the table and how you can help.