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OCULUS STANDS OUT FOR A FEW GRAY HAIRS

Atypically for a tech firm, virtual reality pioneer has sought out veteran leadership.

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STAFF WRITER

Silicon Valley's tech scene is known for celebrating its young. One of its superstars, Mark Zuckerberg, once famously stressed the importance of hiring youthful workers with technical expertise.

"Young people are just smarter," a 22-year-old Zuckerberg said in 2007, explaining that they have simpler lives.

Flash forward to March 2014. Facebook – with a median employee age of 28, according to a 2013 PayScale survey – dropped $2 billion on Irvine-based Oculus VR, a maker of virtual reality goggles that appears to be unusual among startups for its reliance on some relatively mature tech talent.

When Oculus hosted a developer conference in September, a discussion on the future of virtual reality featured CEO Brendan Iribe, 35, Chief Technology Officer John Carmack, 44, and Chief Scientist Michael Abrash, 57. Ben Kuchera, an editor at gaming site Polygon, tweeted: "It's nice to see Oculus ignore the age bias of most startups. Great mixture of young talent and experienced pros."

Carmack arguably gave the most energetic speech that day, riffing for an hour and a half on the challenges of developing Oculus' new mobile headset.

Oculus has plenty of young talent as well, including founder Palmer Luckey, 22. It's been on a hiring binge since the Facebook purchase, recruiting talent with resumes that include such recognizable names as Google (median age: 29), Microsoft, Electronic Arts and the MIT Media Lab.

SEE OCULUS • PAGE 3

Oculus Chief Scientist Michael Abrash speaks at the Oculus Connect conference in Hollywood.
COURTESY OF OCULUS VR

OCULUS: Technology's promise has developers thinking long-term

FROM PAGE 1

"We really need a mix of both," Iribe said in an interview in September.

Some aspects of the Oculus virtual reality experience – such as a digital platform for downloading content – don't require a decade of experience with "low-level" programming, or writing code closer to the "native" language that makes a processor run.

But Oculus also needs veterans who understand virtual reality technology at this fundamental level, and how to manipulate and use the horsepower of a graphics processing unit with great efficiency.

They need to refine the system's performance so that the company's Rift goggle view responds rapidly when wearers move their head. It's part of what makes virtual reality feel real.

"That is a pretty difficult, complicated science to get right," Iribe said.

COURTESY OF OCULUS VR

From left, Oculus executives Nate Mitchell, Palmer Luckey, John Carmack, Atman Binstock and Michael Abrash discuss virtual reality at a conference in September.

Virtual reality technology has been bubbling along in a nascent state for decades, and some of its most fervent advocates have been at it for that long. Fans of VR and Oculus are unusual to the extent they see the fulfillment of the technology's promise as a quest.

"A lot of the veterans have grown up imagining VR for their whole life and wanting it to work," Iribe said. "It attracts these guys who potentially didn't need to necessarily go out and embark on a new crazy difficult mission ... but VR warrants it."

Dean Stoecker, CEO of Irvine-based data analytics firm Alteryx, says it's "a mindset rather than age factor. ... The creative ones always want to learn."

Still, he isn't surprised to see teen entrepreneurs creating apps for mobile devices. When the iPhone arrived in 2007, it sparked a whole smartphone-software ecosystem that's driving much of the startup activity in Silicon Valley and beyond.

"They grew up in a different era," said Stoecker, 57.

"Older entrepreneurs can be as successful if not more successful than younger ones."

VIVEK WADHWA
FELLOW AT STANFORD'S

Vivek Wadhwa thinks older entrepreneurs get short shrift in Silicon Valley. A fellow at Stanford's Rock Center for Corporate Governance, he's been advocating for more diversity among the ranks of startups that score funding.

Wadhwa has authored papers detailing the demographics of entrepreneurs and says his research shows "the majority of successful startups have older entrepreneurs in lead positions."

"Another myth is that only the young can succeed in social media," Wadhwa said.

He pointed out that WhatsApp co-founder Jan Koum was in his late 30s when Facebook bought his Mountain View-based messaging platform this year for $19 billion.

"Older entrepreneurs can be as successful if not more successful than younger ones," said Wadhwa.