

men, popular thinking still associates the irritability-anxiety-depression syndrome with female menopause. This popular belief is sustained because the changes in women are more physically evident, such as rapid decline in oestrogen and the cessation of menses.

Medical research has been slower in studying andropause than menopause because men have been so reluctant to admit to the effects of the gradual loss of their testosterone, the hormone so closely aligned with their manhood.

Furthermore, consider this: little attention has been paid to midlife as a distinct life stage, because, until modern

affirmative action. In the rush to equalise opportunities, we have shown very little intelligent consideration for cultural differences, let alone for differences of gender, age or life stage.

In my experience it is not uncommon in South African corporate and government institutions for black women in their late 30s to be forced to compete for leadership positions with 55-year-old white men, without any consideration being given to their comparative energy levels, the relative value of recent education versus acquired wisdom, or the needs and perspectives of gender difference and life-stage transformation. With the right internal mentoring programmes and ongoing support from executive coaches, these new anomalies can be

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medicine had such a decisive impact on public health, it was experienced by only a small proportion of the world’s population! For example, European and American life expectancy has increased by 30 years since 1900, to age 79 in 2006. Until the mid-1940s, when antibiotics were developed, men on average still expected to die in their 60s. In South Africa, life expectancy figures have been negatively affected by the ravages of HIV/Aids, dropping back down to 49 years; but for those not contracting the virus, the life expectancy figures will be similar to those in the northern hemisphere.

### Problematic concept of ageing

So as recently as 70 years ago a person didn’t know whether she or he could expect to live through midlife and into what was then called ‘old age’. Even if a person made it, their spouse would be unlikely to survive too. Even more significantly, until very recently our South African social institutions, including corporate business practices, were imported from the First World, where they were established decades ago to accommodate the needs of the average European or North American. The mandatory retirement age in the USA for Social Security purposes was established in 1935 to accommodate those who made it to 65 years and it is now up for review as so many people wish to work longer.

The institutions of Europe, too, are seeking solutions to the strains of an ageing population. American business, meanwhile, is recognising and utilising the inherent skills of women, with studies confirming their aptitude as excellent managers.

### Affirmative action creates a potent mix

However, here in South Africa we are further confusing age and gender issues by adding into the mix the pressures of

dealt with optimally and an effective hybrid South African corporate culture can be forged.

It really is time for South African corporate culture to recognise that its workforce can integrate in a complementary way so much more effectively when male and female values are harmonised, and the qualities and strengths of the different cultures and life stages are profitably accommodated. ♣

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Cape Town based executive coach Mary Ovenstone combines her experience as a North American corporate communications executive with her training as a psychotherapist, relationship counsellor, and a corporate coach. She lectures internationally, has written articles for such prestigious publications as *The Journal of Continuing Education for the SA Medical Association*, and is a frequent guest on radio and TV. She specialises in coaching business and government leaders during midlife and people navigating their careers through life changes. Mary also conducts corporate interventions and team coaching. She can be contacted at [mary@maryovenstone.com](mailto:mary@maryovenstone.com)

Author