

LOVE 2.0

GETTING UP TO DATE: As they hit middle age, Silicon Valley executives who had put romance on hold ask experts for help in finding a match

Jessica Guynn, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Silicon Valley, with its cerebral intensity and unrelenting sense of urgency, is an all-hours kind of joint, where napkin-jotters and bonanza-dreamers patter away at keyboards, determined to wring opportunity from every moment.



That kind of all-consuming careerism comes with a catch. As the work-obsessed get closer to middle age, opportunities to find romance dwindle. These Silicon Valley Bridget Joneses, who embedded themselves in cubicles during the 1990s high-tech boom, are waking up to what they missed while they were logged on and tuned out to love.

"When you are in your early 30s, you are really focused on your career. You leave dating to chance. You don't take it very seriously," said Marv Su, a 44-year-old vice president of marketing at Vindicia Inc. in San Mateo. "All of a sudden, you wake up one day and think, 'Wait a second. Being focused on work all the time is not what it's cut out to be. I want to have a great relationship.'"

So Su and other Silicon Valley executives looking for love are straying from their desks and their BlackBerries to make time for dating.

Yet how to meet a mate? They are getting too old to cruise trendy Yelp parties or to ride the N-Judah in hopes of getting picked up on Craigslist's "Missed Connections." They haven't found a single drinking establishment between Palo Alto and San Jose that serves up a better ratio of men to women than Anchorage, Alaska. They frequently are too busy to devote enough time to online dating services. Meanwhile, the friends who used to set them up with eligible singles have peeled off in minivans lined with child safety seats and Slurpee-resistant upholstery.

"What I really came to understand is that I would have to be more methodical about dating and come up with a game plan," Su said.

So he turned to a cottage industry that has blossomed to help Silicon Valley solos meet their match: high-class, high-priced yentas.

His matchmaker is Amy Andersen, the 30-year-old founder of Palo Alto-based Linx Dating LLC, a company with a unique Bay Area twist: Andersen's company pairs San Francisco women with Silicon Valley men.

The idea came to her back in 2001 when she herself was dating a man who had loads of buddies who were single bachelors sporting Ivy League degrees and high-powered careers but few romantic prospects. Some 30 miles away in San Francisco, Andersen's girlfriends, who had similar Junior League pedigrees and Pilates-sculpted bodies, complained they couldn't meet any mates with marriage potential.

"That is when it really dawned on me: What about bridging the gap between the Silicon Valley man and the San Francisco woman, about creating new possibilities that they might not have otherwise?" said Andersen, who launched Linx Dating in December 2003.

Linx "links" educated, physically fit, marriage-minded high achievers after a lengthy prescreening and interview process and sponsorship by a current member of the network. Andersen also puts on "Link & Drink" get-togethers. The idea, she says, is to combine old-world matchmaking, community networking and "concierge" services, such as coaching Silicon Valley engineers, known more for video-game-callused thumbs and bad haircuts than for smoothness with the opposite sex.

Andersen takes them from geek to chic by revamping wardrobes and grooming regimens ("clip nails, shave the beard, meet my hair guy for a new do") to boost their confidence and their chances of impressing their dates. Her fees range from entry-level, no-guarantees membership at \$500 (which has a long waiting list) to the all-frills membership at \$8,500 for 24 months.

Andersen herself offers her best testimonial. She found happiness with a Silicon Valley geek of her own when she pulled herself out of a dating rut by moving from the Marina scene in San Francisco to Palo Alto. There, she hired a fitness trainer, went on a strict one-month detox diet, stopped drinking and cast a wider net.

Eight months ago, her first date with Alex Gould, the 35-year-old CEO of Revolution Media in Palo Alto and a Stanford University economics instructor, lasted eight hours. They're not officially engaged yet. But two weeks ago, they started shopping for rings.

"He is the quintessential Silicon Valley geek I had been searching for -- brilliant in every way, determined, an entrepreneur, good friend, non-game-player and totally commitment-minded," Andersen said.

Andersen hopes to work the same romantic mojo on Su, who has dated a couple dozen women through Linx in the past two years. The Palo Alto resident is looking for a woman who shares his love of museums, music and his black Labrador, Layla.

"If you had asked me 10 years ago, I never would have thought I would be doing this, but I have come to really look forward to receiving introductions from Amy," Su said. "I have always been about doing things to make sure the professional part of my life is in gear. Relationships are something that is becoming more and more important to me. I don't want to miss out."

Shannon Weich, an energetic and successful 37-year-old Los Gatos native who is one of three communications managers for Cisco CEO John Chambers, finds herself in a similar predicament. She called on Marin County mother-and-daughter matchmakers Jill and Amber Kelleher, who have been credited with finding love for three Grammy Award-winning singers, four Academy Award-winning producers and directors, three former supermodels and one of the country's top NBA players in addition to countless high-tech executives.

With one broken engagement behind her, Weich, in the words of "Bachelorette" contestant and new author Jen Schefft, would much rather be "single than sorry." She has an exciting, globetrotting career accompanying Chambers to meetings with the leaders of other countries and corporate America, a hyperactive social life with a wide circle of family and friends, and even time for charity work. Weich says she is definitely not on a biological clock countdown and is prepared to take her time in finding the right person.

"I am really happy with my life and I enjoy being single," she said. "I would love to meet somebody who could add to my life."

Like any good Silicon Valley executive, Weich has her list of negotiables and nonnegotiables. Nonnegotiable qualities include family-oriented, ambitious, funny, genuine and adventurous. She also wants someone who knows what he wants out of life and a partner. It would be nice, but not necessary, if her future mate stood a few inches taller than her 5-foot-9 frame.

Weich is hopeful. She has been set up with nine men in the last 16 months. "I have met some wonderful men who are attractive, articulate, successful and funny," she said. "I've just not met the one with the right spark at the right time."

Jill Kelleher, who has been in the matchmaking business for two decades and specializes in the crème de la crème of Bay Area society, says many of her clients have all the right stuff but are still dateless in Silicon Valley.

"I have a guy with a couple of airplanes, a 100-foot boat. He has it all. He has dated incredible women, including royalty. Now he's in his mid-40s and he's going, 'Wait a minute,'" Kelleher said. "He doesn't want to compromise. He doesn't want to marry the wrong gal. So he solicited me to come in and hopefully find the Ivy League gal of his dreams."

Matchmakers help tilt the odds in a Silicon Valley singleton's favor, said Kelleher, who charges anywhere from \$10,000 to \$20,000 a year to help hardworking people on the go meet "the right one." "We have the caliber. Then it's just a matter of finding the right chemistry," she said.

Longtime Silicon Valley denizen Shannon McElyea, 51, is in search of the right chemistry. A fifth-generation native with an eclectic career that spanned everything from movie production to exotic animal handling before she started evangelizing new technologies, McElyea is a proven entrepreneur on the verge of launching a new startup. She's friends with every "it" Silicon Valley guru. She's a single-engine pilot, outdoorswoman and world traveler with an 11-acre ranch spread in Saratoga. A universal minister, she married the first Google couple, and performed the wedding ceremony for former Google chef Charlie Ayers. But she has to yet to hook up with her own soul mate.

A former boyfriend referred her to Andersen. McElyea's just getting started with Linx, but hopes a matchmaker may find what she's been looking for.

"I'm not looking for someone to take care of me. I would really just love to have a life partner with whom we share values, shared interests and have mutual respect for one another," she said. "And having wild, passionate sex with this life partner is a definite bonus."