



Debunking the millennial myth: 5 ways to improve multi-generational workforces

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We've all heard them. The accepted workplace truths about millennials: they won't be loyal to your organisation; they are driven by a higher purpose; they are snowflakes who need their hands held; they are lazy, selfish and prone to tears.

Companies – aware that, by 2022, millennials will make up 50 per cent of the workforce – have been doing everything they think they must to keep this generation happy. But by pandering to perceived wisdom about this generation, employers risk failing to drive full engagement across their multi-generational workforces.

Employers start to think that every communication needs to be digital and social; managers can't tell their teams what to do; and we must talk about "a collection of experiences," not a career, because this is what millennials prefer.

The problem is that the myths don't match the reality and it's foolish to make such broad generalisations. With 41 the average age of the workforce in most major markets, and school leavers working alongside people in their 70s, organisations are being forced to re-think their engagement approach to encompass all generations.

However, this isn't as daunting as it seems, because - as it turns out –there's more that connects us than divides us. And the work done on engaging the millennial mindset has a broader appeal than you might expect.

Here are five recommendations for how to engage a modern, multi-generational workforce:

1. Get the fundamentals right

When you start getting under the skin of employee engagement, you find that all generations are looking for the same things. There are some generalisations it is safe to make: pretty much everyone wants good pay and reward; career development and flexibility.

Universum's recent study of The World's Most Attractive Employers bears this out. If you take engineering and IT graduates (currently the most in demand), their top preference when looking for a job is "High Future Earnings." Next comes "Innovation" and then "Training and Development."



Only after this top three do we see preferences based more on people and culture, like the desire for working environments that are broadly creative, dynamic and friendly.

Make these universal preferences the core of your engagement strategy and you will be off to a great start. Without them, you are going to struggle, no matter how cool the technology and how inspiring your leaders.

2. Give the gift of time

With the boundaries between work and home blurring and the pace of everyday life increasing, time has become the most precious commodity for people in the workforce. Employers should embrace the millennial-inspired concepts of bite-sized content and on-the-go learning opportunities, not because millennials are lazy and have no desire for detail, but because these approaches can help everyone make the most of the time they have.

The US CEO of software company SAP stopped doing the big, all-hands, town hall meetings and replaced them with a short, two-minute video and a Snapchat code that can be used to spark a dialogue. You might think she was just trying to get down with the millennials by using Snapchat, but actually what she's done is give back what we all need most – time. The social channel isn't the point, it's the philosophy behind it.

3. Let their voices be heard

As millennials now enter more senior levels of leadership, organisations are accelerating the shift from the old school command and control style of leadership to a more millennial-friendly "Coach and Collaborate" model, where teams are encouraged to speak up and share their ideas.

This change will be welcomed across the workforce, as let's face it, who doesn't like to have their voice heard? Leading organisations are embracing this by creating 'psychologically safe' environments where people are free to share their open and honest ideas. They are not doing this out of some misguided belief millennials are 'snowflakes', but because it helps get under the skin of the most challenging issues and stimulates creativity and innovation.

4. Use technology in smart ways

Embrace technology, but don't do it because you think millennials can only engage with the latest shiny tech. Do it because when it's done well, it can help people perform better in their day to day jobs.

Programmes that have been designed with millennials in mind can be just as impactful with other age groups. EY, for example, have gamified learning and development where 'badges' are awarded to employees who've completed goals with digital credentials like data



visualization. It might feel like a very millennial ploy to gamify L&D, but in reality, a Baby Boomer is every bit as interested in the training experience and in getting certification for it.

5. Purpose really does matter

It's true that purpose matters to millennials – but it's not exclusive to the generation. Baby Boomers and Gen X are equally passionate about working for organisations who exist to make their mark on society, not just on the balance sheets or financial markets. It matters a great deal to me, and I just missed out on being a millennial by about 10 years!

Defining your organisational purpose is one of the most important elements in modern business, so please don't create one just to pander to the millennial myths. Instead, involve your entire workforce in creating your purpose, because it's only by taking into account the full mix of cultural values, diverse experiences and shifting expectations that any organization can meet this major challenge.

Fundamentally, every employee wants to be properly rewarded, be part of a good team, have a manager who listens and understands, and to feel they are making a contribution. Whatever their age.

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