Millennials and the multi-generational workforce

By Arno Kemp

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Millennials (born roughly between 1981 and 2000) are often depicted as entitled, lazy, disrespectful, and even narcissistic, but is that really an accurate portrayal of the enthusiastic designer who just joined your department at work, or the friendly substitute teacher who goes out of her way to get the parents involved at your child's playschool?

I believe in generational trends but it is important to remember that each person within a generation is also an individual with their own set of values and beliefs. While there may be numerous generalisations and similarities that apply, each person is unique and has lived through circumstances and events of their own, which have shaped them into the people they are today.

One generalisation, which is more often true than not, is the soft-skills deficiency amongst Millennials, particularly verbal communication skills. Due to instant messaging and chat platforms such as Whatsapp, Twitter and Skype, communication amongst younger co-workers tends to be short and direct, with little to no need for daily face-to-face conversations within peer groups. However, work is about constant communication and, while email and IM are certainly part of the scene, skilful, rich, layered conversations have not lost their importance.

So, what can employers do to fill the soft-skills gap?

1. Your first course of action should be to build soft skills training into the onboarding process - in this way, employees can be prepared from the get-go.
2. Your next step is to assign a mentor to each new starter. This will give them the guidance and confidence they need to put their soft skills training into play - it will also afford them the opportunity to learn from someone with more experience.

3. Lastly, remember that feedback is important. Millennials crave constant feedback - it allows them to improve on any weaknesses and also motivates them to push harder.

Millennials are not the only generation we need to take into consideration - the average workforce currently spans over three generations, which means that there are at least three very different ways of thinking within any given organisation. This could easily create resentment and affect your employee retention rates. Instead of forcing your entire workforce into one mould, try to understand what motivates each generation and then try to build on that, granting flexibility where necessary. The result will be that employees are happier in the workplace, which also means that they will stick around longer.

In my years within the HR industry, I have seen many employees come and go, which has taught me a lot about people, their differences and their needs. It is extremely important to have regular team-building events, where different age groups can interact and get to know one another. Creating generational awareness amongst employees will not only help to create a sense of synergy, it will also help to cultivate a working environment that is free from hostility, which will benefit the organisation through increased productivity and creativity.

There are always going to be stumbling blocks along the road to success, try not to be fearful. The best thing you can do is to be informed and adapt accordingly. Change is inevitable.

ABOUT ARNO KEMP

Arno Kemp has spent more than fifteen years in human capital management and employee development roles across varied industries, including hospitality, banking and academia. Arno is an expert in the fields of adult learning, employee and management development, and human resources management global best practice, he also holds an MSc in Training and Human Resource Management from Leicester University in the United Kingdom.
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