

Why HR should listen to millennials...

A lot has been said about the headline-dominating screen generation who have their own ideas about how companies should be run. And the time has come for HR to start paying attention.



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Joanne Bushell, IWG Managing Director for Africa outlines the need for HR to understand millennials, and the forces of change currently at play in the modern workplace.

Bushell has a lot of faith in millennials and their dedication to the workplace. “I see millennials as the most successful generation that I’ve come across during my professional life,” she says. “I finally see somebody who actually works – in the evenings, on Saturdays and Sundays. Why? Because they’re always connected. They don’t separate greatly between work and private.”

In return for their dedicated work ethic, and the positive impact from this blurred distinction between their work and personal lives, millennials demand a certain flexibility in return. “They want to belong to a community,” Bushell continues. “Because that is where they find their gratification. Both working, and socialising; learning, and being productive. There’s no longer a separation between the classroom and your productive mode. Because it’s always both.

“What is critical for a successful community, is that you have a very wide community. You need to see the millennials in blue jeans and white T-shirts, alongside the baby boomers,” she explains.

“You need to have the start-ups interacting with the internationals, and industry A interacting with industry Z. That is what the millennials are thriving on. And now even multinationals want to have flexible workspaces, including access to a community.”

Millennials’ more cynical critics have said that excessive bending with the winds of change is over-indulgent. But saying that they are spoilt for demanding more flexible workstyles is only telling half the story. That flexibility also saves companies serious amounts of money.

“Now we know what the employee wants, and that makes the HR manager happy,” says Bushell. “But the CFO even more so, because they can cut a minimum 55% of their capital investment and fixed expenses, provided they have access to a flexible workspace.”

More than 55% of desks are empty at one point in time. Transferring to flexible desks immediately and dramatically reduces the number needed, and even more so when more employees work remotely. “Therefore, the more flexibility the better,” she adds. “Short-term, with no capital investments – it enhances your balance sheet. That is a factor driving the multinationals as well as the start-ups.”

Another central theory is the speed of change, and the relative inability to accurately predict where a company will be in 10 years – or even five months. “Take a global pharmaceutical company. They might get an email tomorrow saying, ‘We have acquired company X, get ready to absorb 85 employees,’” says Bushell. “They might hit the ceiling, or they might have just sold off a division. With that kind of speed of change the CFO really needs to be flexible. The agility is key, for expenses as well as the liabilities.”

Attributed to Charles Darwin:

“ *It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent. It is the one that is most adaptable to change.* ”

So, alongside flexible working and a sense of community, adaptability is the last of the three central lessons that HR must learn from millennials. And not just for the sake of the younger generation, but also to survive as a modern business. After all, it won’t be long before these workers are calling the shots.

“Ten years from now, they will be the decision-makers,” adds Bushell. “It can easily be argued that millennials are perhaps more successful than their age and experience justifies. It is pivotal, then, for them to get access to us, the baby-boomers, just as it is for us to get access to them and learn from them. Otherwise we will wake up and learn too late that we are not relevant.”

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