

Bridging the generation gap



With a new workforce of 'millennials' out there challenging the status quo, Neil Cassie offers some valuable advice on how to avoid the stress of employing this 'generation why?'

Companies are just beginning to wake up to the havoc that the newest generation of workers is causing in offices across the globe. Managers are dealing with an influx as a result of the millions of baby boomer offspring, born between 1978 and 2000, now entering the workforce chain. What this means is four generations of workers are now being asked to co-exist at once: the traditionalists (born before 1945), the boomers (1946-1964), generation X (1965-1977) and the millennials – also known as generation-Y because they never stop questioning the status quo.

This latest generation to join the office mix is disruptive not only because of its sheer size but because of its attitude. Millennials aren't interested in financial success or independence, but in careers that are personalised. More important, they want it right now. Why is this the case? Because thanks to their over-involved boomer parents, the millennial cohort has been coddled and pumped up to believe they can achieve anything. These people want feedback daily, not annually – and just in case it's not clear, Millennials are fearless and to the point.

Companies are going to have to adapt if they want to attract, retain, manage and motivate the next generation of workers, because it is they who will dominate the workforce for the next 70 years or so. The next question is how to do that.

Research by 'Workforce Management' demonstrates that companies with enlightened talent management policies have higher returns on sales, investments, assets and equity. So, how do you prepare your organisation to win the talent war that in turn will make your business grow profitably?

Shopping for inspiration

Here is an idea – take your leadership team and the HR Director shopping. To be more precise, take them to Top Shop in London's Oxford Street, one of the UK's most

successful retailers. In there, on any day, you will see thousands of your prospective employees – the millennials. When you have recovered from the shock of the noise and the buying frenzy, start to watch the behaviour of the customers and to examine the elements behind Top Shop's sustained success. More deeply, begin to think about the relationship that Top Shop has with your future employees and ask why are they in Top Shop and not in the many hundreds of alternatives along Oxford Street?

Let's start with the environment within the store. There may well be when you are in there, a fashion show running. There will be models, lights, cameras flashing, music and excitement. The very latest fashions and designers will be on display. You see, you are not in a store; you are taking part in an event.

Now look at what is on sale. Again, it is at the cutting edge of design. It looks and feels as though it should cost a lot more than it does. And it is flying off the racks. If you are there long enough, you will notice that if an item sells out, it is not replaced. Equally, you will not see any items discounted. This is because Top Shop places its faith in its customers. If an item doesn't sell, that is all the data they need to take it away. If it does, that shows them that their design instinct was right and they will bring a new range in to replace it.

If you came back two weeks later, you would not recognise any of the clothes on sale from your previous visit; Top Shop, amazingly, has a two-week turnaround for their entire stock.

So let us do the analysis over a cup of coffee round the corner in the relative calm of Carluccio's Italian Deli in Market Place (this has not been chosen by accident because if you look around, you will see communal tables with you prospective employees multi-tasking whilst enjoying their frappuccinos). Top Shop has created a design marketplace at prices their customers can afford. They invest in world-class designers and market research in the form of global travel to discover the latest trends so that they stay ahead of the curve. They use leading edge systems so that they have first class, instantly-readable data and stock management, best-in-class buying and manufacturing; they employ highly trained motivated staff and generate excitement in store.

Primarily, they invest in their relationship with the customer. And their customer is your potential employee who, in turn, is looking for a similar relationship and experience from their

potential employer. Millennials are not looking for career paths – they are looking for life paths.

Your competitors are in school halls right now offering to fund gap year adventures for school leavers. The people making that offer on behalf of your competitors are 18 years old – they are representing world-class companies with aplomb. They are not their parents currently sitting in Carluccio's with a headache.

The 2002 Universum European MBA study found that students were seeking personal development, learning and diversity, as opposed to security, from their prospective employers.

So what learning can you gain from Top Shop?

First, not only because of millennials, but because of the need to deploy your human capital as productively as possible, you must envisage tearing down the silos, functions and hierarchies that exist within your business and replacing them with a talent marketplace. A free-flowing, market-driven work environment where the talent flows to where the customer need or value creation potential is greatest.

You need to ensure that in order to avoid chaos, there is total understanding of, belief in, and alignment with, the vision of your business, its core purpose and the key strategies that will lead you there. You need to replace the systems you have with sophisticated systems that deploy your human capital with optimal efficiency and impact – and which give you the quality and speed of data that you can act upon immediately. Linked to that, you must become fanatical about capturing the data of the customer interaction/sale and feeding it back into the system so that you can manage quality control.

It is important to create a multiplicity of means to capture, develop, invest in, deploy and celebrate the ideas of your people in relation to helping the business add value and grow. You must revolutionise your reward and remuneration system to make it much more linked to the individual and what motivates them.

It's essential also to make the responsibility to fulfil the vision personal and to make accountability specific to each individual. You must transform how you communicate with your people (to help you with this now that you have had your

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coffee, walk across to the Apple Store in Regent Street and sit in on one of the many daily seminars. Here you will meet many more millennials sucking in knowledge about how to explode the experience, reach and intimacy of the world they live in.

A podcast has more potency, relevance and impact than any company newsletter ever has or will. You must be able to speak the language of your employee and in their medium of choice in order to be heard. There is no such thing as a corporate message any more (at least not one that has a prayer of being effective). Now, in order to engage, you must enter into a conversation.

Having shattered the silos, fiefdoms and hierarchies, you must embrace and encourage communities reaching across and beyond your organisation, which are created and then disappear as if by will. But, what of all the people who currently work in the existing structure, what about them – won't they rebel? Well, some will and they will leave to work for a competitor who hasn't been shopping.

For those who are left, aren't they the ones who are frustrated with the bureaucracy – with the endless meetings about nothing in particular, with thousands of e-mails, not being listened to, the lack of resources, all the politics, the 'time it takes to get anything done around here', with all the rules and regulations, with creative 'away-days', not knowing what's going on and not knowing where you are going? And who then leave work and 'become themselves' again'?

Finally, you must ensure that the beliefs and spirit of the organisation (its culture if you like) is alive and meaningful. When you walk into your company it must feel alive not only through your people but with your unique spirit and values. These must act as the primary disciplining force, not 'the boss' or the HR guy. Everyone should feel it is their responsibility to guide or correct those who fail to respect these values. It is these values that your customer should feel every time you engage with them.

Look around you in the Apple Store. Are you part of an experience? Are the values and spirit of that company alive within the building? Do you feel better/cooler being part of it? Are you learning about yourself and your potential employees? Are you itching to buy an Apple iPod? Have you looked at Apple's share price lately?

Here is the offer

Go back to work and forget this ever happened. Take an aspirin. Tell the story to your colleagues and have a good laugh. And then watch your company not only lose the talent war, but the competitive war also. Or, go back and start the revolution and never look back. Begin on your own life path – and in doing so, unleash your company's human potential.

Neil Cassie founded The Cassie Partnership four year ago, an organisation that helps the CEOs of large organisations close the gap between their company's vision and their peoples' behaviour. tcp does not use process or systems-based techniques, but rather builds a pathway for its clients deploying a series of techniques.

