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**What Works For Leading the New Multi-  
Generational Workforce**

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## **What works for leading the new multi-generational workforce**

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There is a lot of discussion going on about how to best engage the new multi-generational workforce. Along with the hand wringing about engagement and loyalty come many strategies to keep today's multi-generational workforce happy. Examples of proposed strategies include (among others) training managers on generational differences in communicating via technology, getting rid of regular meetings, and providing employees with the latest technology (whether or not it is work-related). But are strategies like these actually effective in keeping today's multi-generational workforce engaged? Or do employees want something more fundamental to work than a new tablet or smartphone every year?

Our research team recently completed a year-long global research project that provides the most comprehensive view of the multi-generational workforce to date, working in partnership with the global network of PwC firms. The study was motivated by the Network's desire to better understand Millennials' attitudes and aspirations, and how they align with the organization's workplace culture and career expectations. The study was done in 22 countries around the world, in both developed and emerging markets. It included 44,000 survey respondents from throughout the Network aged 20 through 60, and involved more than 300 individuals in interviews and focus groups. Though the participants are all professional services employees, they are representative of the in-demand knowledge workers that drive competitive advantage in many industries globally, and are the most difficult to attract and retain.

The study used well-established models of employee behavior to scientifically assess what will keep the multi-generational workforce committed to and thriving at work. The models, which focused on 13,000 Millennials and GenXers within the same career stage regardless of national origin, addressed a comprehensive set of forces at play that influence employees' experiences at work, including team dynamics, communication and work styles, compensation

and career structure, career development and opportunities, and work-life balance. Across the globe we found many more similarities than differences in how the different generations react to these forces.

The headline of what emerged through this research is that the essence of what works for leading the new multi-generational workforce is the same whether you are in New York or New Delhi, and can be summarized as good task leadership AND good talent leadership. By good task leadership we do not mean a narrow process for tracking work flows, but rather leaders strategically managing work design and leading collaborative processes: managing resources so the work can be done efficiently and effectively, facilitating effective two-way communication, and fostering an environment where people trust and support their teammates. Good talent leadership means effectively engaging people in the work: employees understand their place in the work flow, their capabilities are developed, they feel connected to each other and to the work, and they have the work-life balance needed to stay focused and committed to the organization. Good task and talent leadership are mutually reinforcing, creating a virtuous spiral; either by itself is less effective in creating an environment that enables your organization to be successful with the new multi-generational workforce.

We found that the essence of having good task and talent leadership is encapsulated in three areas: make good use of their time, be transparent with them, and provide a supportive work community. When an organization has this strategic focus, both younger and older professionals are more likely to stay, be engaged, and work to ensure the organization's success.

### **Make Good Use of their Time**

Members of the new multi-generational workforce expect to work hard and put in the hours when needed, but the time has to be well spent. Not wasting their time means:

- Managing resources so the work can be done efficiently and effectively.
- Minimizing fire drills and unnecessary face time.
- Making the compensation commensurate with the workload. Working hard is fine, but the rewards have to be equal to the burden of the work.
- Expressing genuine appreciation for a job well done; do not take people for granted.
- Providing work that is interesting and develops their professional skills.

Good task leadership requires optimizing work flow so processes cost as little as possible, but keeping costs too low can lead to over-working your people and/or under-resourcing teams and tasks. This can be both shortsighted and counterproductive: Heavy workloads can result in high stress and less than optimal efficiency. Our research found that working extremely long hours, even if limited to a couple months per year, has a strong negative impact on all employees, including top performers. All employees, whether top or average performers, were more likely to leave when they worked extremely long hours; employees who were not overworked like this were more likely to stay. The work should be managed with the people in mind, balancing organizational productivity and client/customer service against individual stress and work/life imbalance.

Ensuring your employees have appropriate work-life balance is about both the overall workload and the flexibility to do work when and where it is most convenient (within reason). For some people, flexibility is most important – having the opportunity to work outside the office, and at different times as needed – but only if the overall volume of work is manageable. For others, flexibility is the least of their problems because the total workload is simply too much. If someone is working 12 hours a day, the “flexibility” to decide when and where the work gets done can seem trivial compared to the sheer number of hours.

Fire drills and unnecessary face time are big contributors to overload at work. Fire drills as a daily occurrence take time away from organizational priorities and sap the staff’s willingness to jump when there are real deadlines. Making people wait around just because their manager wants them there, or “in case” the client calls, does more than just waste time, it reduces commitment and loyalty because it isn’t perceived as necessary by the new professional workforce. Good task and talent leadership results in fewer fire drills and eliminates unnecessary face time, thus making good use of employee time.

Members of today’s multigenerational workforce do not object to working hard or long hours when needed. But they want to feel appreciated and that they are developing the skills they need to be successful professionally. They also know when they are being taken advantage of financially. If you are going to require long, hard hours, then the opportunities and compensation have to be commensurate with the workload. There is no free lunch when it comes to employee commitment and compensation – especially in today’s internet-enabled times when information is more readily available than ever before (see the next point about transparency).

People also want to know that their contribution is appreciated. The stress created by working under tight timelines and even tighter budget constraints takes a toll, one that frequently goes unacknowledged. Take the time to ensure they know that you – and the organization – really appreciate the work they do and how dedicated they are to their profession. This means not just talking to them, but also listening to ensure that they really hear what you are saying. Even with the younger generation, this is best done face to face rather than electronically.

There is often a tension in organizations between getting the work done and providing professionals with opportunities to develop their skills. This should not be a tension because a great way to develop professional staff is to have them do tasks that allow them to learn and practice new skills. Giving staff input into the variety and timing of their work tasks and responsibilities has multiple benefits including buy-in, motivation, and alignment between the developmental needs of the staff and the needs of the work. We found that when there is good communication with professional staff about career planning, and staff can influence which work they are assigned to, they are more committed to the organization, satisfied with their jobs, and less likely to leave. The organization benefits when professionals are both intrinsically motivated to do the work and developing new skills on the job. Therefore good task and talent leadership means allowing employee input as much as possible regarding the work they do, so they develop and grow while also contributing to the bottom line.

### **Be transparent with them**

We have known for a long time that work processes are more efficient when the people doing the work understand what needs to be done, have the latitude to make decisions to make their work more efficient, and understand how their work affects team and organizational performance. Today's professionals expect two-way communication across hierarchical lines and sharing key information about the work. Doing that means:

- Making sure everyone understands why they do the work they do, and how it links to the bigger picture.
- Involving employees in decision making and provide them with authority to manage their work processes.
- Being honest and forthcoming.

Professionals today want to understand what the organization is doing and why. They want to understand how what they do directly impacts how well the business does. We found that understanding the big picture and receiving clear and timely information about work task assignments are related to the support employees perceive from their supervisors and their commitment to their teams and the organization. To lead the new multi-generational workforce effectively, leaders need to make sure that the big picture is clear to people at all levels of the organization. Everyone needs to understand how their piece of the work combines with others to support organizational success. They need to understand the larger strategy so they can be more focused on outcomes and look for innovations that will improve processes. The clearer employees are about the big picture and their place in it, the more dedicated they will be to ensuring that picture becomes reality.

Beyond simply understanding their roles, the multi-generational workforce today responds positively when they are actively involved in decision making to improve work processes and how they experience the work. This does not mean you have to turn the keys to the kingdom over to them so that they can totally redesign the work as they please. But they often have firsthand insights into ways the work can be improved to promote efficiency and effectiveness while executing the organization's strategy.

Even where the work processes cannot be improved, there often are choices in when and how the work gets done. If there is uninteresting or mundane work that cannot be avoided, giving the staff discretion, within reason, on how they approach it and when they decide to do it can provide a sense of empowerment. Being transparent with them that the work has to get done, but giving them leeway to make it more interesting, can improve commitment to both the work and your organization.

Finally, two of the primary characteristics of the new multi-generational workforce are that they have a low tolerance for obfuscation and they know their market value. While in the past it may have been acceptable to keep information from people at lower levels, changes in technology have resulted in a workplace where information is much more freely available. For example, in our research we found over half of professionals globally (58%) did salary comparisons on the internet; in the United States it is even higher – almost three quarters (73%). Even 20 years ago those comparisons were only possible by talking with people; now anyone can – and many people do – post their salaries and other information about their work and their

organization on the internet for others to read. What this means is that organizations can no longer expect information like compensation that they used to think of as private to be kept private. Organizations have to presume that anything they say will be quickly checked against the public record for accuracy, and any discrepancies will be noted. So any information the organization chooses to share must be scrupulously correct, because staff will know if it is not. Therefore, good task and talent leadership means being transparent with everyone, and keeping them informed and involved with key decisions that they perceive as relevant to them.

### **Provide a supportive work community**

For the new multi-generational workforce, work isn't just about the job, it's also about the people. Employees' day-to-day experiences are not just a result of the work they do, they also are shaped by who they do the work with: their teams, mentors, supervisors, friends, and colleagues. Today's multi-generational workforce needs a community of different relationships at work to be engaged and productive. When those relationships provide connection at a personal level, people are more committed to the organization, and more likely to stay with the organization. Among other ways, a supportive work community can be created by:

- Supervisors and mentors providing the communication and support needed for both effective daily job performance and longer-term career progression.
- Work teams have a shared understanding of the goals of the work and how to accomplish them.
- Fostering an environment where people trust and support their teammates.

Good talent leadership encourages the development of a community through social support such as supervisors who are supportive and appreciative, mentors who are engaged, and providing staff with opportunities to build personal relationships with colleagues at work who might just become friends. How appreciative the supervisor is, how engaged the mentor is, and friendships they develop at work all contribute to the sense of community people feel. While how much development they get, how heavy the workload is, and how much they get paid are critical to retention, employees feeling they belong to a positive community at work reduces turnover – and can help shore up retention when more transactional aspects of the workplace such as development or workload are no longer attractive enough to retain employees.

The support provided by supervisors and mentors has positive benefits in both the short and longer terms. Supervisors and mentors support productivity when they provide clear communication about expectations and goals for the work, and the information and resources needed to get the work done. When supervisors and mentors provide advice and opportunities that support employees' professional development, they also enhance the career progression of the multi-generational workforce.

Organizations can both encourage community and improve efficiency through team processes that allow the individuals to build strong, trusting relationships with each other and with members of other teams. When teams have a shared understanding of their goals and how they are going to do the work, they are more efficient and effective at working together. When team members trust and support each other to get the work done, they are more productive and perform better under stress and tight timelines. Note that this is not the same thing as creating a "rah rah" team spirit with the leader charging ahead and everyone following blindly behind. The leader has a critical role in setting the direction and conditions for the team to perform, but the bulk of the work has to be done within the team. The leader's main job in this process is to help set the stage for success and give the team enough latitude to develop healthy work relationships.

But teams never succeed as a result only of team spirit or each individual member of the team trying their best. Teams succeed when there are group processes that support productivity such as the team as a whole taking responsibility for accomplishing its objectives, members of the team believing that the work and rewards are distributed fairly within the team, and both individuals and the team being accountable for their performance. Ensuring that your organization's formal and informal performance management processes focus appropriately on both the individual's contribution and on the group's effectiveness is a core part of a supportive community that will keep today's multi-generational workforce engaged and productive. That is a core part of good task and talent leadership.

## **Conclusion**

What we have learned about the new multi-generational workforce is that fundamentally people at work of different generations want much the same things: to be treated honestly, to do good work, and to do that work with people they like and trust. We find that employees are most effective when they feel their time is being put to good use, they have input into the work they do



and when they do it, they have the opportunity to learn and grow, they understand how what they do directly affects how well the business does, and feel as if they are supported by their teams, supervisors, and colleagues at work. Organizations don't need sparkly gadgets to engage and retain their people, they need good task leadership AND good talent leadership. With both in place, all things are possible with the new multi-generational workforce.