

■ BY MAJELLA GOMES



How to Manage Millennials

The National Accounting Educators' Convention 2017 grappled with a perennial problem: millennials and how to manage them.

AFTER years of research and debate, employers and educators are still stymied by the millennial challenge. Millennials are the largest demographic cohort in history, and their mindsets and culture are definitely impacting the workplace and career paths.

Their desire for novel experiences and spontaneity defines this generation. "Millennials are often impatient and want to see fast results," remarked Mohd Sidki Hassan, Director, National Human Resource

Centre, Human Resource Development Fund (HRDF). "It takes a while before they realise the downside of instant gratification. They want experiential learning but they have no experience to share, and they don't want passive learning, so they share their aspirations instead. Job descriptions have to change to fit the dynamic environment that millennials operate in." But shouldn't millennials also metamorphose to fit into prevailing organisational culture? Can employers and millennials meet in the middle and blend expertise and enthusiasm to forge a new breed of working styles and maximum productivity?

Approaching millennials with a positive attitude and open minds could pay off. Millennials are an easy target for negative generalisations



and assumptions, and they are largely misunderstood, just like how the flower power peaceniks of the sixties and seventies clashed with their more conservative bellicose seniors. Parents and employers will always face an impasse with their offspring and employees in the clash of generations. “The social environment is dynamic, and it is easy to brand millennials unfavourably but they behave differently depending on their individual environments, backgrounds and upbringing. While there are some general criteria, we cannot be too judgemental,” advised Dato’ Mohd Khalis Abdul Rahim, Chief Human Capital Officer, Telekom Malaysia Bhd.

Some theories hold that millennials are also psychologically scarred by recession and crises. They are frustrated and unprepared for an unforgiving economic landscape post-crisis, where education doesn’t guarantee employment

and the phenomenon of growing global youth unemployment is worsening social upheaval. Monsy Siew, Executive Director, People, Performance & Culture, KPMG PLT Malaysia, said that millennials were just a group of people trying to survive in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) world. “There is so much being thrown at them; they have so much to keep up with – and they are constantly being prodded to keep up,” she said. “They need to feel a sense of purpose.”

MILLENNIALS WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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HOW TO MANAGE MILLENNIALS



L-R: Dato' Mohd Khalis Abdul Rahim, Mallory Loone, Monsy Siew and Mohd Sidki Hasan

challenge? One, millennials need to feel that their contribution matters and is appreciated – just like their colleagues from different generations. Unfortunately, millennials, due to their youth and inexperience, have not yet cultivated the ability to think in ways that help them in their workplace. Ideally, any workplace upskilling or training session for them has to be relatable. Employers need to craft a narrative that resonates with millennials. “It’s like storytelling,” Siew described. “Deliver the message through stories. Learning has to be bite-sized and engaging. Try gamification – games that are customised to the situation – to get through to them.”

But hard-pressed employers already have enough of a struggle with sustaining performance. Do they have the time for hand-holding millennials? Do they have the bandwidth to think up games and other methods to engage their millennial employees, some of whom lack independence or exhibit poor discipline and work ethics?

Two, employers must clearly communicate their expectations and share their values so millennials can fit in culturally. Mohd Khalis suggested that employers should expose millennials to reality by seconding them to areas and units where

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they haven't been before, for a better understanding of the organisation as an integrated ecosystem. Old-school methods don't work with this new generation. “Use unorthodox methods to measure their performance,” he added. “Allow them to fail. It builds character!”

Other out-of-the-box methods to spur performance include doling out bite-size rewards to satisfy their appetite for spontaneity and feedback, and offering blended learning and structured career paths to keep them engaged. Mohd Khalis noted that organisational structures and regulations may need amending to accommodate these millennial-driven trends. Set KPIs that measure effective outcomes instead of hours spent at work. Reward results, not routine. “Flexibility is good because it empowers millennials and can spur productivity,” he said, observing that millennials are encumbered by short attention spans and can't work long hours. On the flipside, employers need to be more tolerant and adaptive to squeeze out more productivity from millennials. “You can't have flexible policies if bosses don't want to let go. Flexibility will lead to agility, and the emergence of an adaptable environment.”

A millennial herself, Mallory Loone, Director, Thriving Talents, Loone cautioned that millennials must earn trust and demonstrate maturity, responsibility and results before employers grant flexibility. Siew advised millennials to practise the “Three R” method. “Be Resourceful – know how to look for things, and don't hope to be spoonfed. Be Resilient; become stronger mentally; Be Realistic – you have to go through the wringer like everybody else. You are not entitled.” ■