4 key considerations of organisational change for the NextGen workforce

By Reneshan Moodley
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The South African workforce is growing. The number of public university graduates continues to climb, with Statistics South Africa reporting that 203,078 South Africans graduated in 2016, up from 165,995 in 2012. And with this year's graduation ceremony season just passed, a fresh crop of young professionals is hungry to make their mark in the workplace.

What often happens, though, is that this emerging workforce, comprising the next generation of innovators and leaders, clashes with older incumbent colleagues who typically have very different professional priorities and ways of working. In response, some companies adopt the approach of hammering their new hires into a shape that fits their organisation.

However, it makes more sense to flip this process around and transform existing ways of doing things – essentially 'hacking' ourselves to better accommodate the next generation of workers. It's not only the new workers who will benefit; the entire organisation is set up for a healthier, collaborative future if it can attract and retain developing talent.

Fortunately, this process of organisational change isn't onerous and can be orientated around four key elements.

1. **Create purpose**

When asked what they're looking for in a job, next-generation workers typically mention purpose. They seek roles where they feel like they're doing meaningful work, both on a personal level and in a broader context. This is especially true for those in the IT and advisory services industries, where problem-solving is key.

In short, people find professional and personal reward in problem-solving. However, issues arise when employees inherit problems to solve with numerous restrictions and delivery commitments already attached. Demotivated and lacking direction, these same workers often resign. This situation can be avoided by shifting the focus from the end result to the purpose behind the problem.

For example, software developers can't devise an effective solution for a client if they haven't come to grips with the company's purpose and unpacked their specific problem. This process requires greater operational fluidity, potentially shuffling teams to ensure the right people are found for the right problems. Striking that fine balance between individual and organisational purpose equates with greater employee satisfaction – and staying power.

2. Create safety

This point is simple: new generations of workers don't respond well to threats like "Don't fail or else." In an anxiety-riddled environment of blame and repercussions, employees are more likely to feel worn down and will look elsewhere for work. At the same time, with relentless high stakes, staff will become reluctant to try new things, stifling their professional growth. This will have a knock-on effect for an organisation, creating departmental silos, discouraging a learning culture and impeding the company's ability to solve problems.

The solution then is figurative safety blankets. Teams need to be protected from experiencing immediate negative consequences when their experimental efforts fail. These blankets should give employees the space to attempt their best work and learn from the process. Feedback should also always include positives, with employees praised for accomplishment.

3. Create rewards

As already mentioned, incoming workers are hyper-conscious about the purpose of their professional role. While rewards like performance bonuses may appear as an acknowledgement of success, the long-standing tendency to use rigid outcomes-based systems, like those reliant on KPIs and KPAs, should be relooked moving forward.

This is because rewards based off work tend to be inconsistent, with each department held to different metrics. With a purpose-orientated workforce, it makes sense to set purpose-centred challenges that have non-variable goalposts. Individuals and organisations alike will benefit from reward mechanisms that drive new behaviour and challenge employees.

For the record, rewards don't have to be only financial. Time off work is a popular incentive, while an ideal situation is rewards customised according to each employee's wants.

4. Create talent growth

Finally, there's the need to nurture new employees. The incoming generation is eager for opportunities to develop and learn, strengthening their talents. Without these opportunities, or if they feel they've hit a glass ceiling at a company, they will leave.

Many organisations already invest in skills development for their staff, whether it be via bursaries or in-house training. Even if budgets are limited, it's possible to promote well-rounded individuals with diverse practical experience by

providing the ability to move between departments.

Another less-considered concept is that of the 'graceful exit'. With the newer generation changing jobs every two to five years – as opposed to older workers committing to one company for decades – employee-employer goodbyes may not be final. If a company makes it easy for a staff member to leave on good terms, the individual could return several years later when their purpose aligns with the organisation and the opportunities it offers. As a highly-skilled knowledge worker, their re-entry into the company should be welcomed as an injection of acquired intellectual capital.

Ultimately, the workforce is changing, and there's no stopping it. A refusal to acknowledge the transformation and attempts to stick with long-established ways of doing things will only lead to high staff turnover and impede company growth. It's up to business decision-makers now to figure out how to work with the younger generation and entrench a culture shift that will benefit everyone at their organisation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Reneshan Moodley is an agile consultant at IQbusiness.

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