

How (not) to Engage Millennials



The young prince had grown weary of the jester – his jokes fell flat, his singing was out of tune and his attempts at acrobatics were dismal. *“Perhaps you’d be funnier without your head,”* admonished the monarch, *“I can easily find a replacement for you.”*

The same challenge as the jester befalls HR managers – how do we engage millennials? As a generation brought up with much love and attention, they have high expectations of being entertained, stimulated, understood and appreciated. Luckily, there is no shortage of advice on the subject: build relationships, give positive feedback, provide novel experiences and internal transfer opportunities, offer flexible working hours and work-life balance, gamify learning, provide chill-out spaces and workplace recreation – get that football table ordered now.

Wrong, wrong, wrong! While there is nothing inherently bad about any of these methods of engagement, the underpinning philosophy is totally flawed. It’s a rerun of Eric Berne’s Parent-Adult-Child model in which the company is the nurturing parent to the employee child. The company loves the child, takes full responsibility for its welfare and happiness and does everything it can to keep the child safe and content. Though well-intentioned it creates learned helplessness and progressive unresponsiveness, for like the prince, and children at Christmas, the employee will soon tire of the latest toy, aka motivational ploy.

The way to break out of this locked state is not through evermore ingenious engagement strategies but by developing a relationship in which both employer and employee take full responsibility for their presence in the workplace. In such a scenario, the issue of millennialism, or Zedism for that matter, doesn’t even come into the equation. Employers look for candidates that bring their own motivation with them and do not need frequent

prodding, reassuring cuddles or work-based amusement. What about the marketplace, isn't that a risky approach in a talent war in favour of candidates? Not at all – it provides a screening filter to sift out those who genuinely want to work for you and those who are just passing through your company to the next stop on their employment road trip.

Isn't this starting to sound a bit reactionary along the lines of *“young people these days need a kick up the backside?”* On the contrary, it's a totally compassionate approach treating young people as adults and not adult-sized children. It's no coincidence that the over-protective company culture has prevailed at a time when the people running businesses are primarily over-compensating Generation Xs, who bent over backwards to give their children a better life than their own and in so doing, inadvertently stifled their self-reliance.

A change of strategy will require companies to look in the mirror and modify their own behaviour. They need to wean themselves off their need (and it's become an emotional need rather than simple desire) to mollycoddle and take ownership of the employee. Employees have sold their time, not their souls. Similarly, the employer should pack in begging favours by asking employees to do extra unpaid work to demonstrate their commitment. If an employee asked for extra money to cover some unexpected car repair bills, the employer would say *“forget it.”* So stop asking employees to go the extra mile and get them to do the work, without fuss or need, that you've hired them to do. In a truly adult to adult relationship, there should be no emotional blackmail on either side along the lines of – “if you really loved me, you'd do this for me.”

Switching to assertive HR may sound harsh at first but if you never let children go, they'll never grow up. Employment practices based on the nurturing parent role are self-perpetuating and destined to remain imprisoned in outdated thinking, leading to individual helplessness and corporate stagnation. But the cell door isn't locked, just closed. It's time to liberate employees, set clear expectations and let everyone take responsibility for their part in work, contribution to results and life in the adult world.

Authors

[George Sandford](#) is a former HR Manager, management consultant, writer and co-founder of Praski Publishing. He has written in Personnel Today (UK), Business English Magazine (Europe) and is author of Cambridge University Press – English for Human Resources, and around 40 e-books.

[Robert Reinfuss](#) is a former HR Director and owner of Reinfuss Consulting and ValueView, specialising in strategic HR consultancy and organisational efficiency in the CEE region. He has featured extensively in Polish HR publications.