NEW I The Millennials, social media and soft skills

Submitted by Kellie Mundell on Fri, 2016-05-27 10:57

Recently, several clients have asked me to directly address the issues raised by the "Millennial generation" in talks to the board. Their perspective is that old certainties and expectations are being replaced, that organisations are struggling to keep up with the "New World Order" and that safety, health and environment (SHE) functions are at the forefront of this.

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One American executive expressed it thus: "The trouble with this new generation is that they are all convinced they deserve prizes. I have them saying: 'I've come in now every-day for a month – when do I get promoted'? There's a real sense of entitlement."

With the executive in question looking very young herself, I was beginning to feel very off the pace: I'd thought it was Generation Y that was the current issue!

Of course, we've been hearing about "the trouble with this generation" since Ancient Greek times but there does seem to be a real change, not unrelated to a massive surge in communication and comparison opportunities afforded by social media.

It's not just on university campuses that the phrase "I know my rights" is being screamed in the face of apparently benign authority figures. (It's interesting that my blog addressing the "safe space/ memorable training" issue attracted more comments on this website than any other).

The writer Daniel Pink has made the point that when old certainties break down, soft skills come to the fore. Writing in *The Times* recently, journalist and author Matthew Syed made the point that the modern sports manager just can't get away with a "Fergie hairdryer" approach anymore. It just triggers a quick call to the agent, another to a lawyer and a flurry of unwelcome tweets.

"Are we trying to upskill our front line management with soft skills and facilitating their application to the SHE field?"

Career longevity at one employer? Unquestioning loyalty? It seems to me it's all a lot more club-hopping Carlos Tevez than Ryan Giggs.

Certainly, in the world of SHE, if we appear careless about the health and safety of our staff then they are more prepared than ever to share that with peers and vote with their feet. It's always been the staff we least want to lose who vote most quickly – but that seems to be very quickly indeed these days.

Many employees from this Millennium generation view a portfolio career as standard and join a company with the attitude "you get three years if you're lucky but be assured I won't even think of staying longer unless you're treating me really well".

These staff don't just need protecting from harm: they actively need nurturing and nourishing and they want jobs that are varied and empowering. They also expect to be communicated with frequently, clearly and in their preferred way. A badly written safety memo pinned to the staff notice board just doesn't cut it.

In this blog I've several times stressed the need for **soft skills training** [1] for supervisors as central to **a strong safety culture** [2], and also that it's at the core of any **systemic wellbeing approach** [3].

Watching global heads of SHE and HR cooking up a strategy is a welcome sight, as I can recall the days when it seemed they only spoke to each other to argue about training budgets.

That said, it seems to me this isn't a welcome, joined up and proactive trend, so much as a necessary and reactive response to a new reality.

Challenge: To what extent are we in the SHE community trying to address this New World Order? Are we embracing new communication technologies as quickly as we can? Are we trying to upskill our front line management with soft skills and facilitating their application to the SHE field? Finally, a question for those struggling with this daily. Just how difficult is it to get the balance between appropriate informed empowerment and entitlement right?

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