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# Will Gen Z Even Care about HR Technology?

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**A**s the economy recovers a bit and older workers finally decide that they can or must retire, HR departments are going to need to ramp up their recruiting efforts. What will it take to attract the best young talent? While it's probably best not to lump all teens and 20-somethings together, there are some important trends in attitudes towards employment that need the attention of HRIS professionals. Bottom line: the most talented young people in high school and college today may not be interested in traditional jobs – and it's going to take innovative communication and collaboration strategies to recruit and retain them. I'd like to share some perspectives, both as a consultant in workplace communications and learning, and as a dean where I also need to recruit and engage young professionals.

## New HRIS Strategies to Tap Top Young Talent

Generation Y, often called millennials, are currently in their 20s to early 30s; Gen Z are today's teenagers. They are obviously "digital natives," but their demands on HRIS go beyond mere Web and mobile access. They will be much pickier about where and how they work, and how they are managed, incented, trained and informed. A recent report from Accenture situates this emerging crisis in terms of digital technologies and information technology resources. It predicts that HR information and processes will be more fully integrated and accessible to every employee. They argue that HR will need to behave more like a Digital Marketing department in terms of analyzing data and creating customized talent offerings, jobs, and ways of recruiting and incentivizing. What might this look like?

- Gen Y and Z are very close to their "tribe" of friends and followers, and have spent a lot of time in classes doing team projects. Could HR identify top talent

along with their intact cohort groups/colleagues/friends, and recruit them as a team?

- Young people are used to mass customization and want to be recognized for their unique traits and interests. Might jobs be designed around people rather than trying to fit people into jobs? Could we use more data about the "whole person" and offer them a customized set of responsibilities, schedules, compensation packages, and growth opportunities? Instead of listing jobs, could we list necessary outputs and outcomes and let prospective employees bundle these according to their own profiles?
- Today's youth are tapped into their own stats, whether it be from a fitness band, their number of followers or friends on social media, or instant feedback from online tests. We could do a better job at enabling employees to be self-managed and directed. Instead of giving performance data to their supervisors, let them manage it themselves, just like they are tracking their own fitness and diet goals.
- Many young people have spent extensive time playing sophisticated interactive games and are accustomed to keeping their families and groups intact remotely through social media, texting and video chats. Digital technologies can form cohort groups who can collaborate in the ways they find most productive – give them a goal and let them decide how they want to divide it up. Provide advanced project management tools to every level and let them run with it. Make work

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a big digitized “game” with immediate feedback on goals and performance.

- Even the best-educated young employees recognize that their skills have a short half-life. Can HRIS do a better job of predicting and assessing current and future levels of skills and knowledge that are needed for certain roles – and providing that to individuals so that they can manage their own learning?
- If more young people want to work for themselves (and it’s the smartest and most hard-working who will choose this route), we’ll need to play to that and develop systems that are adept at managing and sourcing contractors, consultants, freelancers and “taskers.”

Human resources information technology experts are in a great position to use their own strengths and interests to experiment, prototype and network. I’ve always found that it’s useful to benchmark what is happening in marketing, because that function has the most immediate pressure to adapt to consumer needs and behaviors. We need to begin thinking of employees as consumers who will have a choice whether or not they want our jobs – or any job for that matter. Take a leaf from the books of Task Rabbit, Yelp, crowdsourcing and crowdfunding sites, online dating, fitness trackers, Uber and AirBnb. That’s what people use to make important decisions in their lives – and we need to meet them where they live now.

### What Drives Gen Z?

Because of the very public discussions about the lack of employer loyalty and economic

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uncertainty, they tend to be skeptical about employment as a concept in general. A new study about innovation by Northeastern University found that a whopping 42 percent of teenagers expected to work for themselves – and African American and Hispanic teenagers actually trended higher in that attitude (60 percent and 59 percent respectively) than Caucasians (31 percent). While they still saw the value in higher education, about 70 percent felt that they should have the ability to design their own majors.

I’ve found that the most ambitious and intellectually talented college students want a lot out of life – they are active in balancing schoolwork with clubs, a focus on health and

recreation, a commitment to bettering society, and time for family and friends. They are experts in multi-tasking and don’t experience hard lines between work, play, and time for personal fulfillment such as volunteer and charity work. They will likely bring this same perspective to the workplace: they prefer – or even expect – that employers will measure them on performance, not on hours spent on the job. They crave personal and professional development even more than salary because they recognize how quickly knowledge and skills become outdated. And, they’re prepared to job-hop; in college we tell them they’ll likely have dozens of jobs in their lifetimes and probably change their entire career once or twice.

Many young employees who have entered the workforce in the past eight years are under-employed, especially in light of the time and money they’ve invested in their college educations. This is why they seem demanding and impatient for raises, promotions, and other types of recognition. Not only does life happen more quickly for them, they’re under greater pressure. Many of them face US\$1,000 to \$2,000 college loan payments each month and their parents have made huge sacrifices and put great pressures on them to succeed.

It’s also not uncommon for them to want multiple income streams to supplement their salaries and to provide a hedge against layoffs and obsolescence. Employers can no longer punish employees for “moonlighting;” instead they might think of giving them time off to pursue their own innovative or charitable ventures instead of traditional vacations or even raises. Most young alumni I know have a “day job,” are trying to develop their own company, app, professional practice, or online store, might be licensing stories or images they create, doing freelancing or e-lancing, and also have some other gig like playing in a band or doing part-time work for a friend or relative.

If Gen Z expects to design their own college majors, they’ll also expect to design their own jobs. They recognize the need to contribute to an organization’s success and they know that people don’t necessarily fall into cookie-cutter job descriptions. I’ve heard from several of our most talented students that when they interview for jobs, they not only address the job requirements but also talk about what the company may have overlooked in terms of opportunities or responsibilities, and they often wind up rewriting the job description during the interview.

Young people are team-oriented. They are

adept at organizing and using digital tools to collaborate. Interestingly, new research shows that young people who have spent a lot of time doing online gaming are extremely adept at making connections with other people, trading knowledge and skills, and developing their own leadership profiles and reputations. In college, there's a big emphasis on team projects. To decrease the uncertainty in the world, they often prefer to seek jobs together, seeking to share housing, errands and social activities. Smart companies are beginning to recruit intact teams – these students will have already figured out each other's styles and know how to complement each other's skills and personalities. Plus, they are much less likely to leave for other opportunities if they have friendships at work and affordable and pleasant housing situations.

## Back to the Future

While these attitudes and behaviors may seem strange and frustrating to those of us who have struck out on our own and wrapped our personal lives around our work, I'd ask you to step back and put this into a historical perspective. My grandmother was a peasant girl in agrarian Northern Italy. There was no separation between "work" and "personal life" – they all worked in the family/community business of farming. They were in constant contact with "their people" – family and close friends. They didn't have to text each other and post pictures of their meals on Instagram, they just had to look over on the hillside to see that everybody was okay and to the communal courtyard oven to see what's for dinner. Everybody recognized each other's unique contributions, talents, and limitations and they wove in fun with labor whenever they could. Of course, there was no such thing as a "job."

That's the way humans have been wired for centuries, so why should we think young people are strange because technology and other societal changes enable them to satisfy their basic instincts? While employers try to create environments with a work/life balance, it's often done in a very artificial way. Successful supervisors and HR leaders will try to understand what motivates people at their core – not just economic necessities – and will seek to reduce conflicts between family, hobbies, social/religious commitments, and work.

## Appendix: Generations Defined

A lot has been written about generational differences in the workplace; the typical narrative is that:

- **Baby Boomers** (in their 40s to 60s) are workaholic, ambitious employees who fought through civil rights issues, the women's movement, and anti-war demonstrations to create their own visions of the life of success.
- **Gen-Xers** (30s to mid-40s) have been raised by work-centered parents and so are independent, seek more work-life balance, and question authority.
- **Millennials** (late teens to early 30s) are digital natives, over-programmed by ambitious parents, and have short attention spans and patience for paying their dues to work up the career ladder.
- **Gen Z** (current teenagers) – It's a bit too early to know how they'll relate to the workplace, but they seem to crave personal interaction, rather than merely digital, and want the ability to carve out their own futures.

I take these stereotypes with a big grain of salt, since the more valid research studies tend to point out that generations are more alike than different – and that people of all ages change with the times and are more defined by socio-economic factors than birthdate. For example, I hear supervisors criticize their kids or young employees for being technology-obsessed, but those same complainers can't stop checking their cellphones for emails and are actually bigger users of Facebook. A recent study by the Ethics Resource Center found that trends in workplace ethics and compliance transcend generational differences – for example, younger workers have always been more likely to observe and be concerned about workplace misconduct.

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