

December 13, 2018

By: The Manufacturer

It's been well publicised – not least by The Manufacturer itself – that disengaged employees are bad news for business productivity and profitability. But in the rush to attract and retain young talent, companies could be aiming wide of the mark.

Ben Hilton, European graduate programme manager at Air Products explains why.

Personality stereotyping according to age and generation has become commonplace in today's workplace. In a bid to retain talent and boost productivity, many companies are working hard to update their employee engagement strategies and respond to what they believe to be a new, tech-savvy, digitally-dynamic generation. But this investment could be misplaced. 'Confident, comfortable with new technologies, assertive, demanding and ambitious'. I'm describing a millennial, right? Wrong? Well sometimes....

It's become widely accepted that there is a standard 'personality definition' for millennials and yet there is little research to confirm that young people are living up to it. My view? Lumping all millennials under one bracket will do little to boost retention rates. We need to get to know the individual.

Admittedly, 'getting to know the individual' may not sound like the most sophisticated employee engagement strategy and yet it is commonly overlooked. Quite simply, what engages one millennial may be of little interest to another.

Of course, investment in new online communication platforms and other digital tools may well serve to inspire a new generation of graduates, but without programmes, support and structures that are sufficiently flexible to respond to the individual, they are unlikely to stay engaged for long.

Employee Engagement that transcends all generations

I believe we can base individually tailored engagement programmes on some broad criteria. Research, such as the Gallup Q¹² survey, reveals some principles of engagement that transcend all generations.

All employees want opportunities to learn and grow. They want to be interested in the work they are doing and have the autonomy to act on their ideas.

They want clear opportunities in their career (this doesn't automatically translate into aspirations for fast-track promotion), and of course, they want a working environment and company culture that is welcoming, inclusive and open.

But before you accuse me of generalising, one thing is for certain – how this translates for one person to the next will always be different.



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So, what does this look like in reality? And how can businesses turn broad principles into bespoke engagement packages?

Air Products' recent ranking by the *Job Crowd* as the top engineering and manufacturing company for graduates has given me cause for some introspection. We have our graduates themselves to thank for the accolade – ranking is based on employee feedback; but it got me thinking – what is it that's made the difference? The feedback suggests it's our focus on the individual.

Support, sustainability and community

As part of our graduate programme, employees are offered a new assignment every year for three years so that they can learn and grow within a safe environment. There's a strong emphasis on support and guidance, with dedicated mentors

focused on ensuring graduates are assigned roles that they are both interested in and that play to their strengths. This keeps them motivated and engaged.

Sustainability is one recurrent theme that appears important to young graduates. Graduate placement roles directly contribute to our corporate vision and they can clearly see the link between their day-to-day work and future sustainability – from reducing food waste to lessening overall environmental footprint.

The bottom line is graduates have the autonomy to make decisions that have a real-world impact.



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There's also a focus on community. Every year graduates move to a new area for work and they lack an established social network – something that is key to mental health, well-being and balance.

To help them cope with this, they have set up a self-run graduate community with clubs and activities that cater to a range of personalities and interests.

In the world of employee engagement, it's high time we stopped obsessing over the latest tools and technologies and started taking it back to basics. People want to feel valued, considered and understood and we need retention strategies and engagement programmes that afford us the necessary flexibility to adapt to individual strengths, interests and needs.

No-one wants to be another number, a faceless entity in a big corporate machine. That, and that alone, is one generalisation that I am happy to hang my hat on.