

Brave new business world



TOP-DOWN MANAGEMENT IS HISTORY, SAYS ANNEMIEKE ROOBEEK. SHE SEES A DISCONNECT BETWEEN TRADITIONAL MANAGERS AND THEIR YOUNG CO-WORKERS, AND SUGGESTS WAYS OF DOING SOMETHING ABOUT IT.

BY HILLE VAN DER KAA

They are young, smart, well educated and brimming with energy. Modern technology holds few secrets for them, and multi-tasking is second nature. They are also goal-oriented and want to make an impact from day one. And they are claiming their place in an increasingly multigenerational workplace.

Strategy professor Annemieke Roobeek advocates a drastic reorganization of company structures and hierarchies. "The main problem today's managers are facing is that they are completely out of touch with the new generation. The changes we are witnessing in business right now are greater than those of the Eighties and

Nineties. In many ways, the knowledge workers who came to the fore then resembled the baby-boomer generation that preceded them. The new generation of employees is radically different. They have grown up with an unlimited supply of information. They are very creative and are used to thinking and working across the media. They associate quickly and are natural networkers. They are also the first totally digitized generation that have grown up with a global perspective. And their style of working is radically different from that of previous generations."

The new generation of employees doesn't necessarily want to work for a company; they prefer to plot their own course. How should companies adapt to this?

A lot of companies are going through a change of leadership. The knowledge worker and manager is no longer guided by the top-down principle but is more of a coach. That is precisely the kind of manager companies should be recruiting. The new generation is enterprising and self-willed, and organizations must attune to that. Many companies are still very introspective. They don't employ or promote managers for their creativity or their impressive network – which, truth be told, they often don't have. Most of their contacts don't really hang together. The younger, more creative knowledge generation does not necessarily apply for jobs with big-name companies. They often go for smaller companies which are enterprising, knowledge intensive and preferably linked with counterparts in other countries. This enables them to use their creativity.

What does this mean for large corporations like Shell and Ahold? Will tomorrow's workforce still want to work for them?

The big, established companies will not be able to keep pace with the developments in the labor market. However, their reputation as

A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Shayne Vervoort, a 23-year-old MSc student, had this to say about networking:

"The idea behind networking is the same now as it was 50 years back: having something in common with someone and building a meaningful relationship from this. I don't think that the younger generation is necessarily better at networking. They just get more opportunities to network, often with people who would have been unreachable before we had the Internet. I think that what people call networking today is less real, less tangible than in the past. To me, networking is still about meeting real people and bonding with them. Online networking lowers the threshold for opportunistic communication. Personally, I wouldn't consider those people on Facebook or LinkedIn, for example, to be part of my network."



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reliable employers will continue to be an advantage. This is why many graduates still like to kick off their careers working for a large company. But after that, they want to move on. Research on exit talks by an MBA student has shown that creative young people often see the older generation as conservative, so they fail to find a sounding board for their ideas. One way to prevent them from leaving is to create small units where they can work with their peers, in their own way. Philips Design is a good example of this. Philips is still the employer, but is only there on the sidelines.

What would you advise companies to do?

Many companies would be well advised to pull in young talent at an early stage by offering them traineeships and internships and employing them on particular projects. An essential tip is to avoid a situation where young people are stuck on their own amidst older colleagues. Don't assign one or two of them to a project, but seven or eight at the same time. Of course easygoing knowledge workers can be added to the team to coach them along, but don't underestimate the leadership talent of young people. The simultaneous

employment of a group of young people can spawn a new style of working and a change in company culture.

How do you personally view these developments?

I think they are a blessing. Three-quarters of all companies – and the people working for them – are getting old and dusty. The time has come to start utilizing the competencies and talents of the new knowledge generation to the full. They don't look inward but focus on the world outside, despite the fact that most of their managers and co-workers don't work that way. Those managers should look to the new arrivals for ideas. Currently, there is a disconnect between the two groups. Measures must urgently be taken to make the workplace more attractive. This will benefit not just the newcomers, but the old workforce as well. ✖

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