





Published by DECISION magazine  
[www.decisionmagazine.co.uk](http://www.decisionmagazine.co.uk)

Copyright L A Dillner, publisher 2015

First published in DECISION magazine in December 2015. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means - graphic, electronic, or print, including photocopying - without the prior permission in writing of the publishers.

No responsibility for loss occasioned to any individual or business acting or refraining to act as a result of reading material from this book can be accepted by the authors, publishers or any party involved in its compilation, publication, and distribution.

Writing by Larry Dillner and Susan Fenton, [www.fwords.co.uk](http://www.fwords.co.uk)  
Cover design by Jill Din, Artz, [www.artz.co.uk](http://www.artz.co.uk)

Typeset in Dutch 801 Roman, Helvetica TT Bold

## Introduction

The pace of change is greater today than it has been at any other time in recorded history. In the workplace, for the first time, four generations, each with distinctly different characteristics, career aspirations and attitudes can be working side-by-side.

From the baby boomers and generation x and generation y, it is now generation z and soon generation alpha which is emerging. While generation z are still largely in the education system, within a decade they will comprise almost one in five workers.

These new generations are global, social, visual and technological, arguably the most connected, educated and sophisticated generations ever. How can employers understand and engage with these tech-savvy workers as they continue to graduate and enter the workforce?

In this, the second in a series of papers commissioned by recruitment and talent management group Serocor, companies share their thoughts and concerns about employee expectations.

## Which prospects will be attractive?

Employers are increasingly seeing a relatively new trend: a young workforce that no longer expects or even wants to stay with one company in the long term. That's according to Jane Pointet, chief people officer at IRIS Software Group, the country's biggest provider of software and services to the UK accountancy and payroll sectors.

Pointet says the resulting challenge is how to keep good people. "I'm not convinced there's a pronounced skills shortage," she says, "but I think companies need to know not just how to attract the people they want, but what they have to do to prevent them from going elsewhere. People are our IP – if they walk away we haven't got a company."

"The new generation doesn't necessarily think long-term. My generation is used to having an emotional tie [with the employer] that makes us stay but I don't see that in the twenties generation. They see a company as a stepping stone and they seek more of a work-life balance than previous generations. They want to fit their work around their life, rather than live around work."

For example, she says, they don't think it unusual to do two years with an employer then go off travelling for a while, then come back to the workplace, knowing they can keep their skill-set up (and value) in the meantime via internet learning or training.

The question for employers, says Pointet, is: "How do we keep them for that period of time that's useful for us? What career progression do we offer which will be attractive?" Maybe, she argues, it doesn't matter if employees want to go off for six months. "They could still do some work for us," she reasons. "Do we need to be tied to the traditional idea that we provide a set number of days' holiday? We had a couple of key employees who went off to travel yet continued with their projects. That approach, made possible by modern communication

platforms, is something employers need to really think about."

Pointet says introducing such styles of flexible working could be more difficult to implement in the UK because of employment legislation but they're more common in the US, where more staff work on a project basis.

"If the project takes x amount of time they can do their work at 3am as far as the employer's concerned," she says. "If you look at some of the tech companies in Silicon Valley, it's not about working a certain number of hours a week – it's about delivery of a project and that's what matters to them. In the UK we're not there yet but we need to think more about how we can move the goalposts a little to allow it to happen."

This is a particular challenge for long-established technology businesses like IRIS, says Pointet. "Not only do we sell to a traditional market [much of the company's customer base is accountants] but we have a history and culture. It can be hard for a traditional company to adapt, but we have to bring the organisation to a position that's more contemporary so younger people are coming to a place they feel comfortable in. Flexibility plays a big part in making an employer an attractive value proposition."

"We're not a Google in scale – our ability to flex is quite small by comparison – but offering some flexibility advertises a thought process that acknowledges we recognise people need different things at different times."

Flexible working will only become more expected and more commonplace with increased use of the cloud and SaaS [software accessed via the web], she thinks. "It's important not to have a cookie cutter approach. Does it matter that someone turns up at nine-thirty and goes at four if the job is done - and done to the standard that you want? I know I can be more productive when I work from home – I might occasionally put the washing on as well as working, but does that matter?"

Pointet believes companies should go

beyond what legislation imposes on them. “The reality is that most companies should be offering flexible working because they need to, not because they’re forced to. We’re a long way off with some of these ideas but if you don’t think ahead you will lose an opportunity.”

Potential employees, she says, are primarily driven by considerations like flexible working, rather than by money as such. “They ask: What’s the job like? Will I find it interesting? How can I develop my career? Am I going to be happy here? Will I have fun? That’s the employee engagement bit. An established company probably doesn’t pay the highest salaries – well-funded early stage companies don’t have to produce an ROI – so it’s important for us to emotionally engage and develop careers, to talk about the whole package.”

Do employees ‘get’ that? “I think the longer serving ones absolutely do,” Pointet says, “and we have people who’ve been here more than thirty years. We also have call centre staff, for example, who have left in order to get an extra £100 a month down the road. But generally, as long as you are paying fairly, people don’t leave primarily because of money but because they don’t like the people they’re working with or the job doesn’t interest them.

“But you have to accept that if you’re going to hire graduates there will be turnover and you have to make the environment conducive to what they want, make it like a university environment through gamification for instance [the use of gaming techniques to engage workers and encourage them to meet their goals].”

In line with this, the days of ‘suited and booted’ staff are gone, says Pointet. “You don’t need engineers to turn up in business wear to sit and code. I have a daughter who’s a lawyer and even she doesn’t wear a suit.”

It has become easier to convey a company’s value proposition and to attract and engage with staff because of the ubiquity of social media, Pointet believes. “The world

revolves around social media and the new generations will have grown up with it. We need to engage with them on that basis. That means not placing undue restrictions on the use of social media. We accept that staff will be on Facebook and Twitter and there are no rules set in stone about how much time they can spend on there. My start point is the assumption that everyone’s going to be grown up about it.”

In fact, she adds, usage of social media at work tends to be self regulating. Because many employees are ‘friends’ on social networks as well as in real life, they are all aware of what other colleagues are doing online and will flag up any inappropriate usage or references to the employer.

Young recruits’ ease with the digital world has a downside though, which is a lack of literacy skills. “They can text with their eyes shut but some have poor spelling and grammar,” says Pointet. “And there are roles where that is absolutely a problem.”

Another issue for employers is ensuring that there is no discrepancy between the role as advertised and what it really turns out to be. “When you’re selling anything, including a job, you want to promote it as the best,” says Pointet. “But there is a point where you have to explain the challenges of the job.”

And then there’s the ‘e’ word, as in expectations: “A graduate would join the training programme, spend three years in a team role, one year as a team leader, and would then be considered for a management role. This generation expects things to happen more quickly. Everything is concertinaed into a much shorter period. They’re not scared to ask and they’re not scared to move on. That’s interesting. I would never have moved without another job to go to. I have had graduates saying after six months of being with the company that they should be promoted to manager because they can technically do the job. There’s a challenge - how to address these time expectations.”

Important then for companies to retain the traditional disciplines of competency based

and skill-set criteria for judging performance. “If you don’t have that structure you can’t explain to someone why they’re not ready for promotion,” suggests Pointet.

However, she adds, she’s not convinced that traditional performance reviews are still appropriate: “Someone writes something at the end of the year and puts it in a drawer. What does that achieve unless the process is ongoing? I don’t think we will lose reviews altogether – we still need that structure. I think it’s right that we get to a point where we can show what’s involved in a job from beginning to end, encourage people to manage their own performance, and reward them on how the job is delivered.”

She does think though, that when today’s recruits do step up into management they make a good job of it. “Ten years ago a newly appointed manager would tend to park their technical skills, but now they can, and want, to keep up to speed.”

And Pointet has an interesting perspective on the use of the term ‘human capital management’. “Companies use all kinds of descriptions,” she says, “and what you call it depends strategically on what a company thinks of the HR function. Human capital management is quite the in-phrase now but it sound like people are being commoditised. Employees are not a commodity. They are individuals with emotions.”

## Investment to gain competitive edge

“I would say wholeheartedly that a company’s willingness to invest in people is reflected in their ability to gain a competitive advantage,” says Jane Gilham, head of human resources at Xtrac, the market leader in transmission technology.

Of course finding people to invest in can be a challenge for an engineering business, and the company has to look through both ends of the telescope to do so. “There is a

skills gap in engineering, which is apparent between the ages of forty and fifty,” she explains. Which is why Xtrac have taken on not just EU but also non-EU nationals from India, China, Australia, and New Zealand on a sponsor licence from the Home Office. They tend to be qualified to masters degree level which ironically isn’t always enough in their countries to secure a job of similar status there.

“Every year we take four undergraduates from UK universities and assign them to project teams, and if they perform, and achieve the grades, then we will offer them a graduate post subject to trading conditions,” say Gilham. “We also have four new apprenticeships start each year, with twelve apprentices going through the company at any one time. To date we have focussed apprenticeships through engineering and manufacturing but we plan to widen this throughout the business. For the first sixteen months they tour through the company before choosing what they would like to pursue. Our graduate recruits and apprentices will go to local schools and colleges, and every year we’ll have up to six educational visits here, and we take six pupils on work experience. That is important to do, because unless someone have an engineer in the family, it is less likely that they will be looking at engineering as a career. I would say that engineering and technology, which is perceived as more glamorous, are synonymous, and that has to be communicated.

“That means that an engineering business has to be willing to take itself into the local community, and at the very least to be prepared to pro-actively brief its member of parliament. It’s an extra burden, but the only way to have an effective and constant presence in the employee marketplace.

“As a large engineering company, our recruitment doors have to be open at all times. It can take six months to find a skilled machinist, so in effect we always have to be looking to recruit skilled machinists.”

The wrinkle in all this is location. “We

are considered to be a leader in our market sector, but that doesn't mean we aren't challenged by being based in a part of the country where property prices and the cost of living make it more difficult to recruit and retain people," says Gilham.

Her brief is to look beyond qualifications and experience. "We want enthusiasm, to see that a candidate has done something in their lives which furthers their ambition, which will demonstrate that they aren't the type of person to wait for the world to hand them something," she explains. "We'll focus on their manners, their understanding that we are here to deliver what the customer wants us to. It isn't easy because graduates in particular have been prepped to say what they think we would want to hear rather than talk honestly and openly."

There's been a noticeable shift in what new employees, in particular Generation Y, are looking for. "Work Life Balance is much more a priority now, with a much greater emphasis on life outside of work. People take their leisure pursuits much more seriously and want to be able to spend time on them, and with their families," observes Gilham.

"The hardest thing is to understand your workforce, what they want, what they don't, what motivates them, how to reward them," she suggests. "We have tried to have a level playing field across the business in terms of the employee package, but what we are experiencing are an increase in requests for more flexible working. Let me give you an example. An engineer came in to say that his wife was going back to work a year after having their baby, which would mean him getting to the office an hour later on a Friday. A few years ago, who would have even asked! At the moment it can be contained by having the team work out whether it can manage and support the request. Of course the engineer said he would be making the time up, but perhaps in the future companies are going to have to reward people by value rather than the number of hours they actually work."

Employee engagement is now mission

critical, says Gilham. "Every two weeks we have a team brief, which will address financial data, sales, and issues relating to quality for example. Questions will range from issues relating to improving quality to the need to consider a new roof on the bike shed. We have a factory meeting every three months, one each for the day and night shifts, and employees can submit questions in advance. As a privately-owned company where everyone, more or less, is a shareholder, there is a greater sense of personal responsibility and accountability."

And openness. "I remember a health and safety inspector raising an eyebrow when I told him the directors have an open door policy," Gilham recalls. "He went down to the shopfloor and asked the question. Every employee he spoke to said they can just wander up to a director's office if they have got something to say."

Gilham believes that employee engagement helps with recruitment. She explains: "I went to a conference the other day and a speaker was talking about paying a bonus to an employee who refers a friend who then joins the company. I thought I might be missing a trick here. Of course our employees are going to be the best ambassadors for the company, or they should be. So we upped the ante, significantly increased the bonus an employee receives for referring a friend, and in the past three years employees have referred seventeen new starters."

On a more macro level there's an overriding reason why employee engagement provides a competitive advantage. "A company will use an employee's skill-set, but they should also tap into their knowledge," says Gilham. "They're best placed to provide an insight into working practices, because they're right there in the thick of it, but they have to be engaged if the company is to gain their input."



Serocor is a group of recruitment and talent management companies that deliver services and solutions to accelerate potential  
[serocor.com](http://serocor.com)



Serocor Solutions provides Finance, Legal, Marketing, Project, IT & Business Systems, and Human Resources expertise and back office support to the businesses within the Serocor group.



Advanced Resource Managers (ARM) is an award winning technology and engineering recruitment firm founded in 1996  
[arm.co.uk](http://arm.co.uk)



Optamor is a specialist solutions provider within the field of human capital management; delivering a range of innovative services across talent acquisition, talent management, and talent development including managed services, recruitment process outsourcing, and training partnerships  
[Optamor.com](http://Optamor.com)



Hawker Chase is a specialist defence, security, risk, and cyber Executive Search firm  
[hawkerchase.com](http://hawkerchase.com)



Bloc is at the heart of all things digital, helping the world's brightest digital talent find great jobs in the industry's most exciting organisations.  
[helloworld.com](http://helloworld.com)