

COVER STORY

| STORIES BY AMY TAN |

How do you solve a problem like the millennials? They are known to be the generation best connected with social media and digital technology, and confident of what they want in life, and companies cannot do without their talent and knowledge when it comes to designing products and services to sell to countless more like them in the marketplace. Yet, the millennial worker can quickly lose interest in what they are doing if they do not get what they want and are also not afraid to question authority.

Meanwhile, the workplace is becoming more complicated to manage, owing to the increasing mix of employees across cultures and generations. With strong economic growth in the region, demand for the best talent is expected to remain high, as companies have to ensure they can access a broader range of talent to remain competitive.

According to Accenture's "The Future-Ready Organization" report, by 2020, 55% of Asean's working population will be aged between 20 and 39. Millennials, or people who entered adulthood at the start of the new millennium, are markedly different from previous generations of workers. As life expectancy rises, organisations have to manage a broader span of age groups in the workplace. In fact, Singapore requires companies to offer re-employment to eligible employees up to the age of 65 from the previous 62.

How do the needs of millennials differ from those of their predecessors? What can companies do to cater for these needs without alienating other employees? According to Grace Yip, Accenture's managing director of health and public services, millennials expect companies to understand and enable their digital inclinations with mobile platforms and other digital channels that can increase productivity. She points out that Asean's online population is largely under 35 years old, with people in the region among the most active users of social media in the world.

Generation tech

"Technology now allows geographically dispersed talent pools to be viewed holistically, aggregating individual capabilities, experience and networks, and allows employers to adopt a flexible 'plug and play' approach to match tasks to employees with appropriate skills," Yip says. "Gone are the days when workers go to the same office day after day to perform the same tasks with or for the same people."

This bodes well for millennials who are keen to shape their work environment and use digital tools that enable them to work anytime from anywhere. "Millennials do not like structured, hierarchical workplaces, and future workplaces must be more flexible in engaging and retaining these talents," she advises. Companies that offer this flexibility will also be able to streamline operations with the help of technology. "In the future, more companies will leverage technology to identify skilled external talent such as temporary contractors or freelancers. In Singapore, two-thirds of employers already hire contract staff and this trend is set to grow," says Yip.

At the same time, careers are no longer progressing in a linear fashion, with workers earning a single degree to use in a full-time job and holding just two or three roles during their career. "In the future, workers will hold 20 to 30 jobs over the course of five to six careers, which could include part-time stints and working as a contractor. Even now, it's rare to see someone stay in a job for more than three years," says Yip.

She advises companies not to dismiss job-hopping millennials when they are looking for talent, as they could have very good reasons for switching jobs. "Millennials want more authority in their work and that can sometimes come across as impatient, because they want to get somewhere really fast," she says. "They want the breadth of experience, so companies need to take that into account when they think



Millennials at work

Can't live with them, can't live without them. Find out what companies are doing to attract millennial talent, optimise their potential and keep them productive for the long haul.



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about staff retention."

This does not mean that companies should overhaul their work environments to cater to millennials. Yip recommends that companies create more dialogue and talk about the differences between generations and allow staff to share how they work and live and their expectations. "Sometimes, companies don't listen enough. It sounds very simple but there really isn't enough dialogue and that's why people leave," she says.

Meanwhile, companies should also look at retraining its older workforce. "There's the reality that there will be more jobs that will be coming to the fore that never existed before and, in some ways, it is the younger people who are picking up the skills required com-

pared with the older people, who need to be retrained," observes Yip.

Grades alone won't do

She highlights that retraining poses a big challenge to companies in Singapore, as there is still a focus on attaining educational qualifications. "Companies should rethink the way they recruit. It's not about having the educational certification but possessing the right functional skills for the job," she says.

As an organisation, Accenture is shifting away from a focus on a formal education certification in its recruitment process. Last year, it introduced Accenture Open Education, a free online learning programme developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technolo-

gy. The programme was introduced in India, China and the Philippines and includes four key modules for entry-level programmes. People who complete the programme can go on to complete a certification designed by a subsidiary of Carnegie Mellon. "If they pass the certification, we will consider them for an interview. What this does is it cuts down a lot of our effort when we interview and ensures that the people we hire are equipped with the functional skills," says Yip.

While Accenture has started hiring staff based on their functional skills, a survey by jobsDB shows that 70% of employers look out for paper qualifications when they hire. Sheldon Fernandez, general manager of jobsDB in Singapore and Malaysia, notes that this is one of the factors contributing to job-hopping among millennials. "We see many graduates shift jobs within the first three years upon graduation and, a lot of times, they found it hard to find the right opportunity and they expected that everything they learnt in the classroom could be applied in the real world," he says at a recent career conference organised by jobsDB and the Singapore Management University (SMU). "On the other hand, with GDP growth at 1.3% and the unemployment rate at 2% in 2Q2014, it's a competitive job market out there, so companies are doing what they can to retain top talent."

According to data from jobsDB, 67% of companies are looking to maintain their workforce, 30% are looking to grow their workforce and 3% are looking to train their workforce. To attract and retain staff, Fernandez advises companies to reflect on their values in order to stand out and appeal to potential employees. "The way you write your job description and present your company has to be consistent with this, so job seekers know what they are applying for," he says.

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He adds that, increasingly, the role of a company's human resource (HR) department is moving away from an administrative function to a business partner function. "HR's sole purpose is to form a strategic view in terms of recruitment and retention, so we see more management training programmes being introduced. These programmes cater to the millennial workforce by giving them the opportunity to work in different roles in the organisation and eventually enable them to find their speciality," he says.

Jumping in, hopping out

To this end, SMU established the Dato' Kho Hui Meng Career Centre to help its students explore possible career paths. The centre has a team of 11 career advisers who offer students one-on-

one counselling. While job-hopping is a trend among millennials, Sim Cher Young, director of the Dato' Kho Hui Meng Career Centre, notes that most millennials are sure of what they want to do but some face strong parental objections. "This is why you find some graduates job-hopping within the first few years. You also have some outliers who want to switch to a different career entirely," he says.

As he sees it, the current employment market also facilitates job-hopping. "At this time of the year, you have about 12 million Americans entering university and, at the same time, 83% of American fresh graduates have not found jobs. Even if they have a job, it's low-paying. Meanwhile, in Singapore, there's a high employment rate, so graduates can pick and choose," he says.

According to Sim, banking remains the fa-

voured sector among local students because of its high starting pay, which ranges from \$4,000 to \$4,500 a month compared with other entry-level jobs that pay between \$2,500 and \$3,500. "You will find that students still chase where the money is. While tech companies are also popular, companies such as **Google** and **Yahoo!** take in only about two graduates a year; as a result, you have graduates applying for tech positions in banks," says Sim.

To prepare students for work, SMU requires all students to complete an internship before graduation. "Students may have all this theoretical knowledge, and internships allow them to know what they are in for when they join the workforce. About 30% of interns are offered a full-time job upon completing their internships," he says. The ca-

reer centre also adopts the Myers-Briggs Personality and John Holland RIASEC models to help students find out what careers they are suited for. The university holds seven workshops in the first two years of its degree programmes to help students prepare for interviews. These workshops cover topics such as cover-letter writing, interviewing skills, social etiquette and grooming.

Sim reminds students that no organisation is perfect. "A lot of people seek perfection and thus they job-hop. But at the end of the day, a lot of companies still prize experience. It could be a function of Generation X and baby boomers occupying decision-making roles, but there's nothing wrong in holding on to these values. Millennials will have to adapt and show their tenacity." ■