Utilizing technology to engage all generations
By: Stephanie Shaw
Guest Columnist

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Lexington, KY - In an age of rapidly evolving technology, how do organizations embrace technology and use it to its full potential? The answer may lie in how those businesses approach the entry of Millennials to their workplaces.

In the United States, there are 88 million Millennials, who outnumber the 50 million strong in Generation X. As Millennials infiltrate the workforce, businesses are beginning to see a giant shift in how technology is utilized, rather than if it is being utilized. The Millennial generation is the first to enter the workforce as “digital natives,” and while their workplace counterparts are quite savvy, Millennials and future generations will likely influence how organizations utilize technology to do business and engage their workforce.

To underline the impact the new generation will have, the Cisco Connected World Technology Report, a workforce technology study of nearly 3,000 people from 14 different countries, analyzed trends of college students and young professionals and uncovered some eye-opening information. The report found that 62 percent of young professionals stated they could not live without Internet, as it is an integral part of their daily lives. One in three young professionals said the Internet is as important as air, water, food and shelter, and the same amount said they prioritize social media freedom, device flexibility and work mobility over salary in accepting a job offer.

Organizations across Kentucky must find ways to adapt to this influx of Millennials and their new technological mindset. From adopting flexible workplace practices to finding new ways to communicate with employees, workplaces must implement practices to engage talent of all ages. In business, even a slight edge in talent can present a big competitive advantage. Companies are retaining and attracting talent with work-life flexibility and technological freedom — benefits that are not only attractive to the younger workforce but also help engage long-time employees.

Social media is one of the most common technologies that businesses are utilizing to engage employees, and the Cisco World Technology Report is a testimony to the importance. Its findings state, “Two out of three college students will ask about social media policies during job interviews, and while businesses often use social media to network with other business, it is also useful as a means for marketing and a way to engage employees. In larger organizations, social media encourages networking and talented individuals within the organization to begin collaborating, strengthening their talent pool by facilitating this connection.”

The use of technology can make both employer and employee happy, especially when it comes to flexibility. The Cisco World Technology Report found that seven out of 10 students believe being in an office regularly is unnecessary, which is compatible with workers of all ages. Stephen Saurer from Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield, a partner of the University of Kentucky's Institute for Workplace Innovation (iwin), engages both older and younger workers using flexible workplace practices.
"(Technology) has supported a large 'off-premise worker' population and saved significant dollars in travel expenses," he said.

Utilizing technology in this way saves employees gas expenses and travel time while supporting work-life fit. The employer saves in a big way, too; some even downsize their office space and spend less money on utilities and rent.

How technology affects the older generations is important as this demographic holds vast workplace knowledge and will be integral in transferring that knowledge to new employees — most likely via new technology. Older generations in the workplace are often dismissed as unaccepting of newer technological practices, and employee age has been thought to be a predictor of technology perceptions, acceptance and use. However, one research report states that while there are, "high levels of anxiety and discomfort with technology among older adults, it also suggests a willingness among older workers to adopt new IT innovations." Additional research has found that age actually produces a greater IT acceptance and use among older adults as technology becomes more of a culture within an organization. A report from Computers in Human Behavior titled Age and Technology Innovation in the Workplace: Does Work Context Matter? stated, "An individual's chronological age is not the only factor that predicts attitudes during the implementation of a new IT initiative. Workplace characteristics, shared attitudes and beliefs form collective structures, climates, and cultures that operate within work environments, and are thought to influence satisfaction."

The findings from these research studies are found to be true in practice as well. When asked if there has been any backlash from older generations when implementing new technologies, Saurer said, "I don't think so, not really. People seem to 'get it' and embrace the changes."

Technologies will continue to evolve and organizations will need to adapt to engage and retain talent. Whether workplaces are successful depends on how technologies are introduced and implemented. Each generation should and will have a hand in what works.

*Stephanie Shaw is a Millennial and an employee at UK's Institute for Workplace Innovation (iwin). To learn more about iwin, visit iwin.uky.edu or email stephanie.shaw@uky.edu.*

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