

The entitled Millennial? The Boomer who won't retire? Is it time to toss the clichés?

[FP financialpost.com/executive/management-hr/the-entitled-millennial-the-boomer-who-wont-retire-is-it-time-to-toss-the-cliches](http://financialpost.com/executive/management-hr/the-entitled-millennial-the-boomer-who-wont-retire-is-it-time-to-toss-the-cliches)

Canadians are on the edge of a talent revolution, where age diversity spanning 4 generations is transforming workplaces on the same scale as industrialization and the Internet

Nov 03, 2014



Colleen De Neve/Calgary Herald

Trotter & Morton Group of Companies' corporate headquarters aren't what you'd expect from a leading construction subcontractor in one of Canada's most prosperous cities.

The nondescript building in an industrial corner of southeast Calgary is a rabbit's warren of narrow staircases and dim hallways — extensions slapped together as the company steadily outgrew its footprint.

Penny Masear, the company's human resources director at the time of this interview, laughed at the irony. Maybe one day, she said, they'd be able to spare the resources to build a proper HQ. But for now Trotter & Morton is focused on keeping up with contracts

booked solidly into the next decade.
“We’re hiring apprentices like crazy,” she said.

TOP STORIES

The company depends on wooing and training the under-30 set, as well as those making mid-career changes and temporary foreign workers. But it also depends on maximizing the expertise of its older workers who are contemplating retirement or at least reduced workloads. In that, the company is emblematic of one of the key challenges facing Canadian businesses today.



Associated Press

With as many as four generations working together, and increasingly at the same level, businesses are tasked with creating a cohesive work environment that balances, accommodates and leverages the different needs, wants, talents and demands of a multi-generational, international workforce.

The impact of this demographic shift is so significant many experts say it has brought on a “talent revolution,” a transitional period wherein the diversity of our workforce is poised to transform workplaces on the same scale as industrialization, or even the Internet.

Indeed, many companies have already overhauled the way they attract, retain and develop talent.

“We’ve had to be more flexible, and part of it is educating our veterans or supervisors who’ve come up through the ranks in a different world,” said Ms. Masear, who has since moved on to a different company. In the last five years Trotter & Morton has revised its policies on everything from punctuality and absenteeism to disciplinary procedures and cellphones on the job, primarily to accommodate the habits and preferences of its younger workers.

“(It’s helping management) realize, yeah, that kid’s probably not going to call you before 7 a.m. to let you know he’s not going to be there, and that new apprentice is going to book a week holiday to go to Mexico and that’s OK. In the past that never would have happened.”

There are differences in the way generations approach or prefer to work but it’s not the result of moral deficiency on the part of any given cohort, said Ms. Masear, In fact, she saw more similarities than differences between the oldest and youngest employees at Trotter.

Building a meaningful career is paramount to everyone and they were all willing to work hard to achieve that. “It’s just they present a little differently.”

Lisa Taylor, president of Toronto-based consulting firm Challenge Factory and an expert on demographic challenges in the workplace, says companies on the leading edge of the impending revolution need to combat social pressure to pit young against old. Tired stereotypes of entitled Millennials, slacker Generation Xers, and stick-in-the-mud Baby Boomers are false and damaging in the business environment.

“There’s been a lot of assumptions made and a lot of stereotypes pushed through all kinds of different places — the media, training programs — to structure the workplace as if the different generations are incredibly unique and very distinct and necessarily at odds,” Taylor says. “I actually don’t see it. I don’t think that’s true.”

Surveys show no statistical difference between Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials when it comes to the role that creativity, learning and altruism play in motivating them at work. There are negligible differences in their desire to set and reach goals, be recognized at work and participate in a social, team-based and fun environment. The biggest differences between the oldest and youngest in the workforce are, not surprisingly, in areas influenced by life experience, or lack thereof.

Millennials place greater importance on experiencing new places and positions, making significant contributions to an organization — such as inventing something new or making a discovery — and achieving high social standing through work.

While generalizations mostly don’t stack up, lived experience within the workforce will always colour perspectives of members of different generations, Ms. Taylor says, and that does deserve consideration when creating corporate policy.

Millennials, for instance, have been maligned for their tendency to place personal priorities ahead of work, but when viewed through their lens, what some see as narcissism is really self-preservation.

“We’ve just gone through very harsh economic times and the stories in the paper have all been about job uncertainty and unrest in different industries and sectors,” Ms. Taylor says. “It’s really not a surprise that your focus is going to be on, ‘What have you done for me lately,’ and taking care of your own stability.”

On the other end of the generational spectrum, Boomers have garnered bad PR for refusing to leave the workforce and clear the path for subsequent generations. But Ms. Taylor contends they, too, are in crisis.

The North American idea that retirement should occur around 55 or 60 was set in the 1930s, she says, when life expectancy was only 61.

We’ve wrapped our heads around the fact that people can now expect to lead active, healthy lives well into their 80s, but as a society we haven’t adjusted our notion of work to account for productive decades, not years, after retirement age.

The Boomers increasingly realize it’s too long to do nothing, yet they have no role models to guide them into their later working lives.

“When you hear someone say ‘60 is the new 40’, what they’re saying is they don’t feel their age. Sixty is not the new 40 ... It’s just there’s a 60, 70, 80 and potentially 90 that doesn’t look how we think it’s going to look.”

Contrary to popular belief, research from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development shows the longer older workers remain in their professions, the more employment rates for younger workers actually improve. But the kind of work matters.

“As older people stay in the workplace doing work that is commensurate with their level of experience, they need younger workers to be working with them,” Ms. Taylor says. “Because it (boosts) productivity.”

It’s only when older workers leave their fields and take a job at Wal-Mart, for instance, to keep busy or pay the bills that they are directly competing with young people trying to get a foothold in the working world.

There is evidence to suggest that is happening in Canada. Employment rates among seniors have doubled since the 1980s, with job growth strongest in the retail sector.

The flexible schedules and part-time hours offered in front-line jobs appeal to seniors seeking some, but not total freedom, and the talent revolution will require other sectors to start offering the same individualized working arrangements.

“Now that we have the capability to do work any time, anywhere, workplaces need to realize that’s an expectation people have,” Ms. Taylor says. And they’ll have to do it across the board. Whether it’s Boomers dealing with aging parents — or aging bodies — Generation X raising young families or Millennials valuing travel and adventure, everyone is asking for a little more flex.

Overhauling traditional hierarchies to reflect the changing workforce is a complex task and growing pains are inevitable as we navigate uncharted territory, says Ms. Taylor.

“Revolutions aren’t generation-specific.”