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Clay Shirky on managing net generation workers

The professor, author, and social-media expert talks about the unique challenges of managing millennial employees.



Clay Shirky, author and professor of new media at New York University, has written at length about Twitter's and Facebook's influence on politics and economics, even before the social-media tools played a key role in the popular movements sweeping across the Middle East. These technologies also shape behavior at the office, especially for younger employees who log into Facebook at work, e-mail from their BlackBerry on weekends, and consider their career paths pliable and open-ended.

In this interview, conducted at this year's World Economic Forum, in Davos, Switzerland, Shirky sits down with McKinsey's director of publishing, Rik Kirkland, to explain the opportunities and constraints that net generation¹ employees balance at work, as well as how managers can do a better job of understanding and retaining them.

If you're a manager or an employer who's got net gen[eration workers] or millennials working in your business, whatever we're going to call them, I think the first thing to understand is really the tendency to attribute really different psychological motivations to them often takes people off the rails. By analogy, when you see somebody else cut into a line of cars, you think, "Wow, that guy's a real jerk." And when you cut into a line of cars yourself, you think, "Oh, but I had a really important meeting I had to get to." Right? So we attribute other people's behavior to psychology and our own behavior to context.

It's important not to make that mistake with the net generation. They're not different kinds of people than we were when we were their age. Human nature hasn't changed. But behavior is motivation filtered through opportunity. One of the questions to ask yourself as a manager is, are they responding to opportunities that were different than opportunities I had and constraints that were different than constraints I had.

A famous observation about the net generation, the millennials, is, "They're doing Facebook at their desks on a Tuesday morning," which is certainly true. One of the reasons for that is that they're also being asked to use PowerPoint in their homes on a Saturday afternoon. If you went to any manager and said, "Would you offer your 25-year-olds the following bargain: no more Facebook at work, and in return for which, I won't call you after 6 PM or on weekends or ask you to watch e-mail." I don't think the managers would make that deal.

If I'm a 25-year-old and I'm sitting at my desk thinking, "I've been doing this job for two years, it's time to look around for something else. I wonder what's next for me," it would be easier for me to find a better job in a different city, working for a different company, than to go into my own company and say, "Where's a new job for me? How do I get a promotion?"

¹The "net generation" is the demographic cohort following generation X, with birth dates ranging from the early 1980s to 2000. This group is also commonly referred to as "generation Y" or "millennials."

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In part because companies just make the internal career path harder for all kinds of reasons—they don’t publish it as clearly, middle management is often worried about people trying to rise through the ranks. People think, “Oh, I can keep them there for a while because they’re useful in that position.”

If the search costs for finding a new job are easier outside your company than inside your company, you’re communicating something to them about loyalty as well. That’s another place where a manager can say, “Look, here’s how career paths go at this institution. Here are the skills you need, [and] here are the different departments we have.”

But it’s culturally very hard, because it accepts the fact that the employees who are on your front line, who may well be your best next employees in higher positions, have a much greater ability to search for opportunity than they used to. And so you can’t rely on them sticking around for however long you want them to stick around before you promote them. ○