

Aptus is changing how it handles its multi-generational workforce



MILLENNIAL BUG

In today's workplace, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Gen Z all sit side by side in a workforce that boasts different values and working styles. These days, there can be a 50-year age gap among employees. What does the modern leader need to consider to attract and retain the talent a business needs? **Simon Keegan** and **Alex Bell** investigate

Aptus Utilities' managing director, Lisa Kerford, has experienced first-hand the difficulties of a multi-generational workforce. On site, her workers range from age 16 to 60s.

Ideally, the younger workers (Gen Z) would spend years being shown the ropes by the wise old heads. But it didn't always work that way. Veteran workers would gravitate towards their old workmates, and the youngsters seemed to lack the traditional industry loyalty and didn't stick around long enough to gain their own experience. To combat this, Kerford is changing the way the company trains and appraises them.

She says younger workers tend to be from families already employed there, so recruitment can be challenging: "You tend

to get generations working in the industry. For example, we've got one guy whose two sons are working in the industry, and we also have a grandad, dad and son in the industry. It tends to be 'That's what my dad does so that's what I'm going to do'.

"We have a consultant who is 73, and the oldest lads on site are 62, 63. Then we have apprentices at the age of 16 and 17. The issue is all the experience is at the back end."

She adds: "You have to find the right type of person. They don't have to be a genius because a genius doesn't want to dig holes, but you want someone who is prepared to dig holes. They do need to be intelligent as they need to get three NVQs, so we have to pick the right people and

spend the right time and resources on developing them."

Of the qualifications, she explains: "We are a multi-utility company. That means we install gas, water and electric into new developments. In terms of expertise required, we use two-man teams, but every member of the team has to have a gas, water and electric qualification, whereas traditionally in utilities they will be gas or water. So those who have all the tickets are quite scarce resources."

"Multi-utility was born in the North West so there are lots of resources. We have grown to five depots from the Scottish borders to the Midlands. As we move to those areas, resources are a nightmare because it's not something they've had. Coupled

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with an aging workforce, and people not spending money on training, that's when the apprenticeship scheme was created."

But even after qualifying apprentices have everything they need except experience, she says. "Ninety per cent of what we do is brand new. It's digging fresh on new-build sites. But when we come to connect to existing infrastructure, that's where experience is required. They are going to find things they haven't come across before; it's that experience that needs passing to the younger guys. So we try to pair up the older guys with the younger guys. But some of them are like old married couples and they don't want to work with anyone else. But most of the lads will split up and take on a younger guy."

There's always been natural difference between generations, but does Kerford see a bigger gulf between, say, Baby Boomers and Gen Z?

"Yes, I think it's the drivers. Anything from mid-20s downwards have a different outlook on life. Historically we would take someone leaving the business to pursue a different career as a lack of loyalty. If someone has trained you, you used to stay at the organisation until you can't go further. But now people move for a bit more money. When I started at Manweb, a lot of the older people had started at 16. I don't take it personally, it's just the way people are now."

"The attitude towards experience being part of why you are paid what you are has gone. They [younger workers] think, I've got the qualification, I can do the job, so why aren't I being paid that? They forget the reason why 'that guy' is on £45,000 is because he's got ten years of experience and you're expecting £40,000 and you have two. It's massively frustrating. And that's why people leave."

To try to retain talent, she is changing the way training and mentorship is delivered, has scrapped annual appraisals and now does monthly feedback sessions.

She says: "After we lost a lot of young workers, we introduced a five-year

'DON'T PLOUGH EVERYTHING INTO RECRUITMENT IF YOU CAN'T RETAIN STAFF'



Booking.com's head of people is Lisa Shaftesley. Booking.com employs more than 1,000 people in Manchester, with an average age of 36.

The tech travel firm is recruiting for more than 100 roles as it prepares to move into Manchester Goods Yard later this year.

Speaking about Millennials and Gen Z talent, Shaftesley says: "We're fully cognisant of the need to be relevant to this audience. From family-friendly policies, relaxed dress code, innovative modern office environment, flexible working, perks like free health insurance, team building and recognition budgets, as well as career progression and learning opportunities."

"It is an exciting time for us with the new Manchester campus on the horizon and a great opportunity to make a difference in HR," she adds.

Booking.com's core people goal is enabling a working environment that attracts, engages and develops people to their full potential.

"There's very little reason to be ploughing everything into recruitment if you can't retain staff as it doesn't make sense and isn't sustainable," says Shaftesley. "We're operating in an exceptionally competitive environment and employers need to balance their recruitment efforts with retaining staff – all dependent on the individual business and their rate of attrition."

"It's important to be mindful and aware that what candidates want at the start of their career might not be what they want/need when they've been in the business for a while. Some proactive strategies we use are talent reviews, succession planning, colleague engagement surveys and regular performance and development discussions. Where there is a critical need, we consider 'stay interviews' to get a grasp on what will make employees stay with the company."



development plan which has been very successful. It lets them know what's expected and tells them where they need to get to and what they will get paid if they achieve it.

It's about feeling empowered, telling them they are doing a good job, and giving them feedback. We don't say negative feedback, we say 'development opportunities'. We have found the amount of youngsters leaving has now steadied."

"We are also in the process of reviewing our training with a view to creating a training academy."

Liverpool-based global medical products company Algeos is led by Max Sheridan. The managing director is proud to report a staff turnover of 4 per cent over the past 12 months.

Algeos' workforce has an average age of 44 and is currently on an apprenticeship recruitment drive.

"Overall I think you have to be more flexible than ever before as candidates are asking lots of questions. We're also based in south Liverpool and close to big companies including Jaguar Land Rover and Shop Direct, so it gets very competitive."

"We have an Employee Assistance Programme, a mental health first aid programme and have adopted something

Evolution of a leader

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called a 'listening room' every Wednesday. And it's because we want to be a place where people want to stay and we want to be flexible and more open as we grow."

Michael Salla, deputy chief executive at Everton in the Community, says it's important to adapt to generational workforces: "We have a real breadth of ages and abilities across the charity – ranging from staff in their late teens right up to 70-plus."

"I adapt how I manage various team members, based on their experience, skillset and, importantly, their personality."

He adds: "It certainly isn't a 'one-size-fits-all' answer, and it's vital to be yourself as a leader. So, while there are thousands of leadership strategies and training courses you can follow, the best way to attract and keep talented people is to have a strong, purposeful vision and to achieve

this collectively through open, respectful and positive relationships with staff.

"Diversity in a team is key. For example, the older members of our team possess decades of experience and can bring incredible expertise to the table, while younger people may have entered into their working years during periods of national uncertainty and volatility, equipping them with skills to adapt seamlessly in this new norm of constant change."

Jeremy Hartley, managing director of Eric Wright Group, says:

"Multiple generations working together, with wide-ranging views and expectations of the workplace, provide an ever evolving level of complexity for

leaders and businesses who must think differently and embrace change. Providing clarity on strategy and purpose is critical to becoming an employer of choice, with clear alignment to values, community impact and the environment all playing vital roles in attracting the right talent."

Summarising the current North West jobs market, Four Recruitment's Claire Sofield has no hesitation.

"It's just total chaos," says the Manchester-based company's managing director.

"And I say that with two hats on. One is with a recruitment hat based on what we're seeing day in, day out. But we're also a scaling business that is facing the challenge of recruiting and retaining."

Sofield points to chief people officers and HR being increasingly

welcomed to the boardroom table.

The scramble to find workers is well and truly on, as is adopting policies and benefits that prevent the best you have from walking. There is an attention on talent like never before, with high inflation and a cost of living crisis to boot.

"If I look at my team, they could all go somewhere else and earn £10k more without even trying because everyone's desperate for good staff," says Sofield. "It means you have to dig much deeper than just salary as people value a sense of belonging, value and purpose more now."

Battling burnout through wellness programmes, redesigning offices and the scheduling of remote and hybrid shifts are all critical factors for an employer.

"What's mindblowing," says Sofield, "is that there are still businesses out there saying we'll work nine-to-five and offer 20 days of holiday. As a recruitment company, we focus on working more and more with those companies that invest in people."

Sofield's advice is to "focus on retention before you even start on attraction". ■

Claire Sofield



LIFE MAPPING



Brother UK recently became the first UK company to retain Investors in People Platinum status for the third time.

The Tameside company's average length of service is 14 years, with a commitment to 5 per cent of the business being apprenticeships.

Sam Johnson, organisational development manager, and Lauren McColl (pictured), head of talent and organisational development, oversee Brother's 'life-mapping policies'.

They say their policies help management to stage proactive interventions to support colleagues through different life stages.

It means Brother's 142 employees are supported on issues including pregnancy, bereavement, internal career changes and more.

"Generally speaking, I'd say that the great resignation is happening and that there's buoyancy in the jobs market," says McColl. "Through our learning development programme, we tend to train people for the next role, even if we don't necessarily have a role for them to go to. We ensure that we equip them and enable them to be able to go for a role externally as we don't want development to be hindered."

She adds: "It is hard to please everybody, in the sense that some love hybrid working and others don't."

"We continually listen and get feedback from employees on what they want and expect. We do a lot of talent development, succession planning and tailored development plans off the back of that."

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