

The Future of Work: Changing rules for a new company

By Jennifer Swanberg
Work/Life Columnist

When you were young thinking about the future, what did you imagine? I envisioned cities and towns without cars. People would step out of their home onto a matrix of escalators with the capability of moving people all over the United States. As illogical as it seems now, to a seven-year-old, the thought of endless escalators was magical. I also daydreamed about replacing my two brothers with robots; these robots would not tease sisters and would dispense chocolate at the push of a button.

Although our country's main source of transportation is still the automobile and not the escalator, the future is now. And when it comes to the organization of work, it's time we catch up to the future. According to Charlie Grantham, Ph.D. futurist and author of the recent book *Corporate Agility*, the social systems that supported the industrial age are breaking down. Education systems, health care systems and the organization of work are not performing as efficiently or effectively as they could. This should be of no surprise to any of us, as the assumptions on which these systems were developed are nearly a century old.

The future of work was the topic of a three-day national retreat in which I recently participated. Sponsored by Accenture, 20 thought leaders convened at a retreat facility in Warrenton, Va., to identify a critical set of emerging trends and issues that are shaping the future of work, the workplace and the workforce.

Work environment matters

People are leaving jobs because they are stressed out and do not "have a life" outside of work. According to research conducted by Watson Wyatt WorldWide, the two top reasons people are leaving their companies are stress and lack of work-life balance. For the first time in many years, the cost of labor is higher than the GDP, suggesting that there has been a decline in U.S. productivity. To stay competitive, it is imperative that workplaces consider redesigning the way work is done; employees can no longer work productively under the current high time and energy demands of the workplace.

Belief systems are changing

According to futurists, the U.S. belief structure will morph from a faith in "more, bigger, better/humans can control it" to "global interconnectivity and personal moral responsibility for stewardship." We already see this with younger workers. They seek jobs with a purpose. They're more committed to work-life balance than to the firm. They want to work fewer hours. With this shift, organizations will become smaller, more service-oriented, fluid and function-specific.

Time management is out — managing energy is in

Highly effective organizations are moving away from managing employees' time to managing their energy. Yes, energy! National statistics suggest that less than 30 percent of the U.S. workforce is fully engaged. To fully engage people, places like GlaxoSmithKline have shifted to a paradigm that posits that performance and health are grounded in the management of energy. This paradigm, developed by Jim Loehr and Tom Schwartz, suggests that time is finite, but the quality and quantity of energy is not. According to this new model, full engagement requires people be physically energized, emotionally connected, mentally focused and spirituality aligned with a purpose beyond one of self-interest.

Gen Y-friendly organizations fully understand younger workers

According to the firm Brazen Careerist, Gen Y-friendly organizations excel in four key areas. First, these organizations commit to understanding the values, beliefs and work styles of Generation Y. Second, they recognize that recruiting top Generation Y talent means having an online presence. Third, Gen Y-friendly companies are engaging this younger cohort by ensuring their management philosophy communicates its core values and beliefs, respects social responsibility and connects employees' work to the broader purpose of the organization. Fourth, these companies have recognized that retaining Gen Y involves rethinking the meaning of a career path. Generation Y workers do not want that old "ladder system;" they want the flexibility to move around an organization as they grow.

I left the retreat with my head swirling with ideas about how to translate these concepts into strategies for Kentucky's organizations and a notebook bursting with new rules for the new economy. Nonetheless, it's clear that to survive and thrive in the 21st century, organizations will have to work smarter not harder, redesign work structures, and shift focus toward managing people's energy.

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