Game of phones:
new strategies for the millennial workplace

Digital natives are dramatically shaking up businesses around the world – and much more than just office harmony is at stake. In response, renowned technology executive **Nora Denzel** distils her 25 years of global experience into a seven-point blueprint for companies looking to adapt and thrive in the millennial age.

"There are ways to embrace the change and turn it into something very positive for your business"

▶ **WHEN I STARTED WORKING** for IBM in 1984, complete with my freshly minted software-engineering degree, it wasn't possible to connect to the computers in our Silicon Valley office from home. And since home computers were still a rarity, perhaps remote connection wasn't really needed anyway.

With hindsight, it's obvious that computers without remote access would become obsolescent sooner rather than later. On the other hand, identifying which of today's office tools are in line to meet a similar fate is less clear-cut. Mobile devices will be around for the foreseeable future in one form or another. The future for fax machines and tape storage, on the other hand, is already looking very uncertain – but not as much as the whole concept of office-only tools.

Why? Just take a look at your colleagues. As the so-called millennial generation enters the workforce, they are demanding an end to the old ways of doing things – and are causing unprecedented upheaval as a result. Unlike previous revolutions in working life, which have usually been imposed top-down by companies on their staff, this change is therefore being driven by employees. And companies who fail to understand the issues at stake are risking much more than workplace harmony.

Below, I clarify exactly what's going on in today's offices. I highlight some of the unexpected problems these changes create for companies, before sketching a blueprint for how they can successfully manage this development and even turn it to their advantage.

SOCIAL WORKERS

The column inches devoted to the millennial generation can themselves be measured in multiples of a thousand. Generations, just like the individuals that form them, have distinctive personalities – and although precise definitions vary, the generally accepted millennial characteristics include tolerance, civic engagement and increased self-confidence. These are combined with high personal and social expectations that can border on self-entitlement. As the first generation to grow up entirely in the internet age, almost all millenials also enjoy complete familiarity with digital-communication technologies – the origin of the phrase "digital natives".

Of all these characteristics, technological intimacy has the most dramatic consequences for companies that employ millennials. First of all, it's transforming how employees communicate. The widespread use of advanced mobile devices is creating new social arrangements in the workplace as well as much more social communication patterns, and social networking behavior is starting to hit the enterprise in a huge way.

For example, employees today want the ability to create shared documents simultaneously. The days are gradually disappearing when you would create a document and then email it to all the stakeholders for revisions, usually made by one person at a time in crude mark-up language. Instead, imagine a document with 10 authors working on it simultaneously, with profile pictures marking which area each person is working on that moment, and other authors able to see changes being made in real time. This is just one example of the real-time social collaboration that is being demanded by millennials, and indeed by anybody who wants to communicate with colleagues in the same way they communicate with their friends.

Perhaps even more crucially, millennials' familiarity with digital technology is also changing the tools employees communicate with. Millennials want more "social" ways of communicating while they work and are increasingly avoiding email in favor of instant messaging or texting. Tools such as voicemail are already heading the same way as my old unconnected IBM workstation. Millennials demand the same tools, applications and social networks in the office as they have at home – or, at the very least, they require equally good user experiences. In perhaps the most challenging development from the point of view of their employers, they also want to use the same devices at home and at work.

POST-MILLENNIUM TENSION

It's quite remarkable just how disruptive these developments actually are. In fact, we could say the first person to bring their personal mobile phone into the office was actually carrying a stick of dynamite. Quite apart from the difficult questions of work-life balance that remain to be properly worked out, companies now have to face the following technology challenges:

▶ As the one-size-fits-all model for enterprise communications disappears, IT departments must handle significantly more complexity in terms of devices, applications and technology.

▶ Legacy systems may require radical reengineering, and in many cases there will be a need for completely new infrastructure.

▶ When employees demand the same functionalities and usability from workplace and consumer technology, IT departments come under enormous pressure to reinvent tools and interfaces. This development is often referred to as the consumerization of IT.

▶ Companies are losing access security around the perimeter of their data centers, and unsecured employee devices carry new malware threats to central IT systems. Device management also becomes more challenging since employees are usually reluctant to allow companies to enforce usage policies on their personal property.

THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

How can businesses respond to these developments? Can they even turn them to their advantage? The first thing to note is that although many of the challenges noted above may appear to concern only the CIO, they have implications for much wider aspects of a company's business. The following is my seven-point blueprint for companies looking to adapt and thrive in the millennial world.

❶ **Embrace the change.** While most companies would doubtless prefer the simplicity and security of a COPE (corporate owned, personally enabled) device strategy, that battle has already been lost. It's the same story with applications. To give just one striking example, although only 33 percent of employees in the legal sector are officially authorized by their IT departments to use free file-sharing platforms, 88 percent use these platforms anyway [1].

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❷ Get consumer technology working for you. Rather than trying to keep it out, think of consumer technology as a shortcut to stronger and better workplace tools. For example, as more devices incorporate fingerprint sensors, mobile identity management – long a vexing problem for IT – becomes easier. The potential security applications of features such as accelerometers and geolocation capability are equally promising.

❸ Make your tools part of your brand. Increasingly, prospective talent will judge your company by the quality and flexibility of your tools when making career choices. It's a challenge, but also a chance to differentiate yourself. You should choose your vendors with extreme care – for instance, the strongest partners understand that designing mobile applications for a distributed workforce is very different from developing the IT applications of the past decade. Ease-of-use and availability are the most important design elements.

❹ Think of your employees as your customers. Your tools and applications will be compared with consumer-focused offerings that are built on deep understanding of users and how they interact with devices. A customer-eye view is essential to keep employees committed and engaged. The fact that only 22 percent of today's enterprise applications can actually be accessed from mobile devices isn't good enough [2]. And the applications that are available typically don't support touch-and-swipe, which seriously diminishes the user experience.

❺ Understand that you don't make the decisions any more. Vendors can now bypass you completely and move into your company whether you like it or not. All they need is a great application that employees just start using – at best the vendor will sell you an enterprise license as an after-thought when there is no way of removing the application from the throngs of employees already using it.

❻ Keep pushing the security angle. Even if it's harder to enforce on non-COPE devices, you still need a clear security policy that emphasizes trust and personal responsibility. Your employees should commit to this and be fully aware of the issues involved. On the vendor side, there are some good entrants into the device management sector, but we're not there yet. The winners will find a way to balance the usability and security of mobile applications – you just have to keep pushing them to deliver. It's too important for your business to brush this issue under the carpet.

❼ Don't be afraid to ask for help. The scale of the change, coupled with the inevitable hype around new technologies, can seem overwhelming, and your organization may lack the skills to implement – or even create – a coherent plan. Only a third of CIOs feel they have the necessary in-house capabilities to develop apps [3], for example. But it's not about what you know, but how fast you can learn. There are industry experts available to help your teams get started and set your company on the right path – use them.

GAME OF PHONES

Companies that embrace this blueprint will be in a much stronger position to meet the challenges of the millennial office. In addition, vendors and developers can adapt elements of this structure to form the basis of their own strategies as a new generation takes over the workplace.

It's also vital to remember that millennials are fast becoming your customers as well as your employees. So it's not enough to shake things up internally – you need to take the lessons you've learned and apply them externally, which raises an entirely new set of questions and uncertainties. For example, adopting a mobile-first mindset with customers opens the door to mobile analytics and big data, both of which are totally different from any traditional IT initiative. Your current IT tools almost certainly can't handle the volume, velocity and variation of big data, and it's just about impossible to calculate return on investment because you don't know where the project is going to take you.

Finally, it's worth reflecting on what these dramatic changes could mean for the idea of the workplace itself. Historically speaking, workplaces have always been specific physical locations where we use specific tools to produce specific things, whether goods or services. There's a direct line from the field through the factory to the office, and from the plough through the lathe to the keyboard. But when our tools become divorced from one physical location and can be used anywhere, the concept of the workplace also starts to dissolve. And if that helps people get out of cubicles and into environments that enable them to be more effective, flexible and creative, then is it really such a bad thing?

Any CIO will tell you that millennials have a lot to answer for. But as I have suggested above, there are ways for companies to embrace the change and turn it into something very positive for their business – and we might even see the end of the office park along the way. So the next time you run into one of your millennial colleagues, perhaps you should take a moment to thank them. ●

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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has over 25 years of experience across a wide range of global businesses, including executive positions at Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Intuit and Legato. She has led teams in enterprise software, enterprise consulting, telecom software and cloud computing. In 2012, Denzel was named as one of the top 10 women in technology by CIO Magazine.

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