



By Kia Pajouhesh

People-managing the “social media generation”

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Throughout the developed world, employee longevity and workplace loyalty have critically and irrevocably changed over the past decade. Data from the social media giant *LinkedIn* shows that the average tenure is now reduced to just under two years. Even more alarming, a sizeable subgroup of the population - mostly members of Gen Z and young Millennials - spend only months in each employment role before moving on to seemingly greener pastures. This leaves people management teams, including those in the health industry, needing to contend with an ever-widening generation gap - between the above groups and the rest of their workforce.

But what is behind such a seismic shift? At its core is a single disruptive influence: the internet, and in particular, social media.

Workplaces are increasingly being populated by a new generation of employees wholly nurtured and raised in an internet-obsessed world. As a resource, the internet has an abundance of positives, with rapid access to information, online services and, more recently, powerful AI. However, as is now freely recognised, the world of social media reflects a darker side of the net. Gen Z and young Millennials have spent their entire lives immersed in the alternative reality of this ever-evolving space with apps such as *TikTok*, *Instagram* and *Snapchat*.

A number of well-documented behavioural patterns are now being attributed to prolonged exposure to social media. Multiple studies have demonstrated a strong link with anxiety, depression, shortened attention span, self-absorption and the overwhelming urge of FOMO (the fear of missing out) - all of which pose significant challenges to keeping employees happy in their workplaces.

I believe, however, that there are four additional ways in which social media affects the day-to-day behaviour of the younger generations, which in turn represents a unique and immediate challenge for business management.

1. Speed

“It takes a second to judge and a lifetime to understand.” Kia P.

By its very nature, social media trains users to make rapid, almost instantaneous decisions. In an instant, the individual decides whether they “like” or “dislike” a post. Apps demand that a definitive decision be made instantly, without thought or consideration of extenuating factors or information. Concerningly, this is also often done without consequence or remorse.

In the workplace, these quick, unequivocal decisions can be both detrimental to the business and a barrier to the individual growth and development of the employee. A split-second, knee-jerk response to a situation or information may have negative outcomes. For example, a junior staff member in the health industry may well form an immediate negative opinion of a

cranky client over the phone without taking the time to think about factors that might have led to that behaviour, such as anxiety, or fear of treatment based on a previous negative experience. Making a split-second decision to judge rather than understand fails to treat the patient with the humility and patience required to better understand their needs and expectations. It also disengages the team member from the pathway to developing more compassion and empathy in their social interactions at work.

2. Ignoring the big picture *(Decisions made on a single detail)*

I recently observed my 15-year-old daughter’s *Instagram* habits. She scrolled through posts at a blindingly rapid rate, pausing for a moment on approximately one in three images to “like” a post. The posts she liked had a number of elements that would have taken me, at my age, some time to properly take in and comprehend. I suggested she cease scrolling for a moment while I asked what inspired her to like one particular photo. She replied, without pause or doubt, that it was the influencer’s shoes in the picture. Our ensuing discussion revealed that her decision was made without consideration of the subject person, their demeanour, other products in the image, background or actions within the photo. This learned behaviour has caused whole reputations on social media to be built on small details, irrespective of the larger picture. It seems the growth of social media is seeing the degradation of analysis of the whole picture in favour of single-detail focus.

In a work environment, such a process means that the greater tapestry of context is often being ignored in favour of a simple decision based on one factor. “Cancel culture”, whereby an individual can be boycotted without warning on the basis of one action or belief system, is a reflection of this rudimentary decision making. When focus is on the part rather than the whole, decisions may lack sound judgement. To this end, an individual may become disenchanted in a great role based on just one detail. Furthermore, rumours and mistruths can take a new lease on life with this tendency to judge the whole based on one detail. Without persistence to seek facts and the truth about the bigger picture comes a lazy acceptance of misinformation and misunderstanding. Repairing such thought processes can be time-intensive - or, in some circumstances, not even possible. Further still, such a mindset can even prevent a potential candidate from engaging with the business in the first place.

3. Polarisation

“All the colours of life exist within the shades of grey between black and white.” - Kia P.

Social media can serve to proliferate dichotomous thinking. People, images, stories and narratives are polarised - either

liked or disliked, swiped left or right, where the “all or nothing” mindset of the user works to their detriment. Also, social media profiles are optimised, providing a curated feed designed to appeal to a specific individual and thus reinforcing a limited narrative. Very quickly, an individual becomes an extension of their social media feed, attracting similarly minded individuals, thinking and ideals. This in turn limits the user’s capacity to be challenged about their ideas and perspective. Losing the capability to question and analyse leads to a simplistic view of the world in which only the polarised black and white exist, not the nuanced shades of grey in between.

In the workplace, this type of thinking gives rise to two tendencies: a resistance to being challenged and a predilection for focussing only on what one likes or dislikes. An employee can lose sight of the bigger picture, exaggerating what they don’t like at the expense of the unseen positives in any given situation. It can be quite destructive when an employee who has developed a negative mindset attracts other likeminded people, shunning positive-minded colleagues who may challenge them with an alternative perspective that benefits the organisation. The resulting toxic workplace culture can spread amongst staff, more unencumbered and more virulent than ever before.

4. Apathy

(Avoidance of conflict and confrontation at all costs)

Another trend amongst a large proportion of young social media users is a reluctance to engage and enquire, meaning that concerns and questions often go unheard. By way of example, while a *TikTok* video may attract, say, 20,000 likes, only 20 to 200 (0.1-1.0%) or so might engage by commenting - reflecting a reluctance to actively interact. It is also common for the same small group to engage over and over with a particular post, while the majority of users remain largely silent and passive. In most circles of social media, questions are frowned upon and labelled as trolling behaviour and are, therefore, avoided at all costs by the silent majority fearing the risk of backlash and condemnation. Due to this aversion to healthy active engagement, in what is often incorrectly dubbed conflict and confrontation, internalising negative thoughts has become the norm for so many.

In a work environment, such behaviours can manifest as a reluctance to raise concerns or queries, at its worst leading to abrupt and unexpected departure from your organisation of so-called “sleeper” employees. Younger employees often keep their burning concerns to themselves, quitting before having an honest discussion with their managers and without an appreciation as to why things are done in a certain way in the work environment. Furthermore, when issues are addressed, many younger employees shut down and refuse engagement. In the health industry, business decisions are based on patient care, employee happiness, the science of health and basic business viability. At first blush, the reasoning behind decisions and processes may not be immediately clear to all employees. This combination breeds a challenging situation - by not raising questions in the aim of avoiding and fearing confrontation, younger employees can harbour misinformation without benefiting from an alternative viewpoint.

What is the solution?

As a business owner in the health industry, I believe it is crucial to perpetually adapt to emerging employee trends. Right now, management styles need to be flexible enough to understand and respond to the social context in which our younger employees have grown up.

Firstly, both managers and team members must become aware of the above emerging trends in young people’s behaviour. Secondly, younger employees need to be provided with the tools to appreciate the pitfalls of those trends. Otherwise, our youth risk drifting from workplace to workplace, never experiencing high job satisfaction or the joy of being in a multi-generational team that genuinely thrives as a cohesive group.

Furthermore, managers need to spend more energy on nurturing their staff, imparting the wisdom that it’s important to speak up early when problems arise; that positive dialogue and engagement in a workplace are not to be confused with conflict or confrontation; that job satisfaction requires focus on the whole rather than the part; that real issues versus idealised perceptions should be investigated; and that understanding, not judgement, builds a great workplace culture.

It’s also up to managers to ensure that new challenges, role variations and clear progression pathways are made available and that pursuit of those is encouraged. Ongoing communication with, and careful monitoring of, team members is more important than ever. This could start with simple changes such as more frequent meetings, one-on-one or in smaller groups to procure greater engagement; provision of consistent evidence-based feedback; and a dedication to offering transparent information.

Last but not least, clear and open messaging explaining business decisions should address the key purposes of the business.

Conclusion

*(“My single best investment has been my investment in people.”
Kia P.)*

Education about the advantages of benefits, security and growth that can accompany long-term employment in a great workplace is critical to retaining staff. As someone who has invested so much of myself in staff retention, I have made it a personal mission to keep the “social-media generation” of employees more engaged and content in my dental practices. There has never been a more important time to listen, adapt and overhaul traditional methods of people management so that long-term employment relationships can be nurtured; and, in turn, our businesses and our people can grow and prosper.

About the author

Dr Kia Pajouhesh, a University of Melbourne graduate, established Smile Solutions in 1993. Situated in the heart of Melbourne’s CBD and incorporating the Collins Street Specialist Centre, Smile Solutions is the largest singly located dental practice in Australia engaging over 80 clinicians, including 20 board registered specialists. Together with his Core Dental chain of practices, he controls over 100 chairs across Melbourne, with a combined patient base of 350,000.