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THOUGHT PROVOKING IDEAS OF THE GLOBAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2022

Adding a Non-disclosure term to the “intergenerational contract”: how an anonymized idea submission process could utilize efforts across age groups towards an organization’s success

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Ageism towards younger colleagues remains a thorny issue in many businesses

“Emma, I just received a package from IKEA. Would you mind assembling my new lamp? Let me know when you’re finished.” This was the first real assignment from her line manager – a senior vice president in a publishing conglomerate – that Emma Waldman received during her first job after graduation (Waldman, 2020). Currently an Associate Editor at Harvard Business Review with seven years of experience, she still recalls to that moment whenever she feels reluctant to express her opinions in the meetings with more experienced colleagues. From her perspectives, the presence of young employees like her in the office is not treated as seriously as their more seasoned counterparts.

We often hear about protection against age discrimination towards workers older than 40 at work, yet how about the same issue in reverse direction? The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission clearly

stated that under-40 staff is not the target of protection in federal laws (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). This “loophole” increases the chance that the ideas, feedback, or collaboration effort sought by young employees are disregarded by the seniors.

In turn, such disconnection between generations within an organization could become formidable barriers on the organization’s journey towards its goals. This is evidenced in a client once served by Innovisor – a boutique advisory firm focusing on organization network analysis. A regional unit of this client had approximately 800 employees, and they would like to revamp the knowledge sharing process to align with the corporate-wide strategy on modernization (Innovisor, 2018). However, with 6 years as an average time for new-hires to fully immerse to the organization’s network, and with absent connections between employees having

more than ten years of experience and their less senior fellows, challenges for effective organizational knowledge management were more pronounced. Though tenure is not always equivalent to age, we can safely assume that the above is the same situation faced by younger staff in the case company.

Paradoxically, it is this youthful generation that makes critical contribution to organizations' success nowadays, thanks to their enormous energy, flexibility and creativity. Particularly, their insights can enable firms to stay relevant with Millennial or generation-Z consumers, their tech-savviness helps firms keep up with latest trends in internal technology infrastructure, and their fresh ideas can serve as promising starting points for improved internal processes. Thus, how could any innovations or business strategy in this ever-changing world be executed successfully without the inputs and engagement from those young faces?

Some solutions have been implemented, yet the reach may not be broad enough

In fact, several companies have realized potential drawbacks of the growing ageism and come up with different approaches. One of which is “shadow board”, which comprises non-executive staff collaborating with executive ones in strategic management to diversify the pool of initiatives. Examples are observed across firms in different industries, such as AccorHotels, GroupM in India, or Gucci (Jordan & Sorell, 2019a). Nevertheless, because the members of “shadow board” are usually identified or nominated through executive committees, not all the young employees in the organization have the chance to raise their voices. This is not to mention the issue of seniors' favouritism or the reservedness of introvert individuals.

Another solution presented is reverse mentoring, similar to how Jack Welch encouraged younger staff to instruct senior executives on how to use the Internet (Jordan & Sorell, 2019b). The basic idea is introducing an executive member to receive mentoring from a younger employee on the youth's

perspectives in strategy, leadership or mindset at work, apart from digital skills. However, effective reverse mentoring significantly depends on finding the right matches, especially given diverse personalities, commitment levels and conflicts of interests, as well as on the perceptions of mentees – those executives afraid of revealing their shortcomings to more junior ones.

Furthermore, promising as they are, those solutions require considerably extra time and effort from both the senior and the younger employees. Taking time into account specifically, we can list down the time to identify the right “shadow board” members or mentor-mentee pairs, time to approach or persuade potential “candidates”, or time to train participants to ensure consistent practices. Another downside is ideas at more operational levels tend to be overlooked, as the targets focus more on executive concerns. Most importantly, not all the voices from the younger employees get serious consideration equally.

That is where the anonymized idea submission process comes into play

The core of my idea is a process encouraging employees to freely express their ideas to the company, regardless of ages or hierarchical levels. From my observations and experience in some multinational companies, the idea collection process is usually open to the whole office, where employees submit their initiatives together with their names and teams to the consolidators. In case the submission is done via systems, the identities of idea owners are made known anyway to everyone relevant to the systems or the meetings, before the ideas' validity is assessed. Nonetheless, with the proposed process, ideas are gathered in a dedicated “hub”, which can be as simple as a dedicated email address or sophisticatedly embedded to an internal portal and system. There would be hubs at different group levels of the organization: team-wide, division-wide and corporate-wide, yet the recommended size of people in a group should be at least five to minimize inefficient resource allocation and

lack of anonymity. The “hub” is administered by a “Cross-generation Learning Accelerator”, whom can be anyone except the key decision-makers of the groups. The Accelerator can privately ask the authors to elaborate more on their initiatives and resubmit if there remains vagueness or confusion. As the only one who has authorization to access and retrieve data from the “hub”, this person will consolidate all the ideas submitted, then present them as pre-reads to everyone before teams’ idea evaluation meetings, without having to disclose who submit what. The anonymized presentation of ideas ensures the opportunities for all employees to speak up and be listened seriously, at all ages and seniority levels. At the same time, requiring the Accelerator to send out brief descriptions of all ideas before meetings will remarkably reduce the risks of that champion ignoring initiatives from specific colleagues in the group. Identities of the authors are disclosed only after the teams have thoroughly discussed the ideas and are reaching the stage of categorizing them for further actions, such as “pipelined to implement”, “on hold”, or “more research needed”.

Once the idea is greenlighted to proceed, the rights to lead and oversee the implementation would be delegated to the idea owners, despite their ages or seniority. Ensuring the decision rights to implement to co-locate with the initiators’ implicit knowledge and insights would result in optimum delegation according to Jensen and Meckling (1995), which in turn leads to the successful execution and organization-wide improved performance.

Will this process be able to reinvent intergenerational fairness?

In fact, the idea of similar knowledge-sharing platforms is not completely new. As part of Estée Lauder’s reverse mentoring program, a portal for the Millennial mentors to exchange ideas internally called Dreamspace was established by themselves (Jordan & Sorell, 2019b). Everyone in the company receives a bi-monthly newsletter on the trending topics discussed on the portal. Once again, the same problems with reverse mentoring and

the “Shadow Board” emerge: not all young employees are invited to have a say, and only leading topics are informed to executive members, while several aspects of the business can be improved starting from small ideas in any corners.

Whereas, the anonymized idea submission process as described above overcomes such limitations in coverage, in terms of both the number of young employees eligible to participate and the scope of rooms for improvements across the organization. Because the “hubs” are available across different levels, executives will not be overloaded with the enormous number of initiatives submitted, while ideas of any types have minimized risks of going unnoticed by key decision-makers at respective hierarchical levels.

It would be amazing news for a new hire joining the company, full of not only new things to learn but also fresh perspectives on the long-established processes in his or her department. “Why things do not work the X way?”, “How about doing Y to get things done faster, cheaper, better?”...Now he or she can propose such suggestions and let them be heard by the whole team in the meetings, without fearing to receive sceptical looks or even neglect from more tenured ones. Once the ageism constraint is lifted up, the young generation will be more motivated to look for rooms of improvement in anything they encounter in the workplace, and to come up with creative solutions for enduring problems. It would also be good news for the more experienced ones, especially the executives, as the bias that their younger colleagues are not competent enough to “teach the fish how to swim” is reduced (when the personal identities of the initiators are not presented during the evaluation phase). Interestingly, older employees also benefit from the proposed process, as they would feel more comfortable to voice their opinions without the fear to be perceived as lacking knowledge in the eyes of the more juniors. The more ideas instilled to the idea pool, the more options the decision makers can compare and consider. The more opportunities to speak up given to everyone, the more

inclusion and fairness is maintained. All in all, the gains for all generations at the workplace and for the company as a whole become more visible.

It is certainly not “one-size-fits-all”, but workarounds are possible

The availability of such an anonymized submission process would accelerate the organization's momentum to be more innovative, competitive and efficient across layers. Nevertheless, some concerns still need to be addressed to improve its feasibility.

First of all, would the presence of different “idea hubs” cause confusion if the company was organized in a matrix structure, where employees should pay attention to submit their ideas to different hubs: at product level, function level or project level? To avoid using extra resources and making the process cumbersome, the firm may consider combining the “hubs” for levels with similar characteristics, for instance, projects with the same frequency and nature, or products targeting similar customer segments. Proper prioritization plays a vital role before the firm decides on which directions to roll out the “hubs”.

Additionally, how about the implementation of such process in start-ups or small companies in general, where resources are even more constrained and the possibility to anonymize the idea owners is limited? The process could be simplified further depending on the companies' cultures, such as fewer layers or less frequent consolidation and meetings. However, I would not be less optimistic in those cases, because the small size actually gives more rooms for every employee in the organization to exchange ideas. Eventually, this idea submission process, as well as reverse mentoring, “shadow board” or similar approaches, only helps during the gradual transition to a more open mindset across age groups and levels in companies. It is the diversity-embraced thinking that remains the most sustainable solution for intergenerational fairness.

These challenges posted above may leave rooms for further initiatives, yet I have strong confidence in the contribution of the anonymized idea submission process to cross-generational learning and collaboration. “Two heads are better than one” – goes an old proverb. Hence, no matter how “older” is one head than the other, every idea counts.

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