

New Skin in the Game: Tapping into young professionals as business leaders

By Dr. Siphokazi J. Ntetha, Tlotlo Letlape, and Egomaron Jegede



Background and context

I am a Millennial and this year marks the 10th year anniversary of my professional career. I come from a country whose Youth fought and lost lives, advocating for equal and quality education which led to powerful societal changes. Youth Day is a National Public holiday in South Africa because of the youth movement that continues to challenge the status quo even today. I remember the first few years when I moved to the City of Gold to start my first job as an intern Psychologist, bushy-tailed and bright-eyed - full of ideas, vision, and possibility, yet utterly lost on where to start this journey. I am grateful to my first organisation where I was able to channel all my brilliance in meaningful ways. Through a programme called “strategic onboarding”, the organisation would take new joiners on a 3-day offsite onboarding trip to better understand oneself, where you are going, and what you offer to the organisation’s vision. I was part of this programme 10 years ago, and while I have not yet found the “Gold” in Johannesburg, this intentional focus on my growth from the beginning of my career, set the tone for impact I have made not only to the organisation I belonged to, but societally and world-wide.

To elevate the voice of young professionals, I have co-authored this article with Millennial Council alumni members, Egomaron and Tlotlo at Deloitte Africa Consulting, cohort of 2018/2019. We aim to contribute to the conversation on youth inclusion and multi-generations at work through a) busting some misconceived impressions about the newer generations in the workplace, b) positioning young professionals as business leaders, and c) offering some tips on how organisations can implement youth inclusion in the workplace.

A shift in the workforce - new skin in the game

As we navigate perpetual change in our world of work, our research suggests that understanding the workforce is the first step to aligning behaviour with organisational objectives in ways that recognise workers’ needs, develop their capabilities, and respect their values and those of the organisation (Deloitte, 2021). Our workforce is now a combination of multiple generations with vastly different life experiences that require us to pause, and reconsider how we do work. In Africa alone, almost 60% of our population is below 25, making it the youngest continent in the world (UN World Population, 2017). We are already seeing an influx of Gen Z’s, who are truly disrupting the system. This disruption has been met with frustration, the blame game, and perhaps some misunderstanding. Generational theory offers a useful frame to understand the different generational groups according to birth years, but fails to fully appreciate the complexity across, and diversity within, the groups (Forbes, 2015). Depending on the book you pick up, you will probably get a different, and at times contradictory, view of young professionals. We have developed a table below to offer deeper considerations on some of the myths about young people that really need to be put to rest.

<i>Misconception</i>	<i>Another consideration</i>
<i>Young people are entitled to a trophy for everything</i>	<i>Young people have a different set of needs and approach to work. They demand fairness and equal treatment, which raises the bar for everyone. This has a lot to do with their upbringing where they were included in almost all family decisions, which is a very different approach to the more authority based parental styles of earlier generations (Crowley, 2016)</i>
<i>Young people are motivated by money</i>	<i>Research suggests that young people are no more motivated by money than their generational predecessors and may even practice better debt management habits. In fact, a study found greater sensitivity to financial management due to most Millennials graduating during the economic recession (The Nielson Norman Group, 2016)</i>
<i>Young people instinctively know more about technology</i>	<i>There is some truth to this, due to Millennials and Gen Zs being digital natives. However, not all Millennials are born in the digital era, and exposure and comfort to technology does not account for the behind-the-scenes workings of technology (Cowley, 2016)</i>
<i>All young people in business are Millennials</i>	<i>Young people are not a homogeneous group. Millennials are born between 1980-2000, making Gen Z's born from 2000 the newest generation to the workplace.</i>

“Let’s embrace different” - the power of diversity of thinking

Diversity of thinking is the new frontier of Diversity and Inclusion in the workplace for companies who want to be creative and innovative (Burke, 2018). As traditions and norms shift in tune with natural evolution, and disruptors such as the current COVID-19 pandemic expedite what the Future of Work looks like, the value of young leaders partnering with experienced executives (who have spent years guiding organisations through transitions) is amplified. The rising complexity of business challenges typically requires input from six different mental frameworks: evidence, options, outcomes, people, process, and risk. In reality, no one is equally good at all six; hence, the need for complementary team members (Deloitte, 2021). Collaboration across generations is a potent approach to the complex, dynamic and multifaceted issues we face in today’s business landscape. Given that a slew of solutions across all sectors of business have required innovation, rapid prototyping, pivoting and transformation, there is so much possibility for young leaders with enough experience to challenge the status quo, while achieving results, to demonstrate collaborative and inclusive leadership from the very low levels of the organisation. As a business of the future, leadership is expected at all levels of the organisation.

Making a shift towards intentional youth inclusion

From adding to the diversity of thinking, to offering an ease of technological adoption as digital natives, young leaders have a lot more to offer. The remaining question to answer is *How do we tap into the energy of young leaders in the workplace?* Below are some initial pointers for intervention from the perspective of fostering an inclusive culture, advising young people, and tips on what leaders can do differently tomorrow.

On fostering an inclusive culture - We need to activate an inclusive culture that appreciates and leverages the mutualistic and fulfilling relationships at work, across different generations. As with racial inclusion not being just “a black people thing”, a focus on youth inclusion should not alienate the older professionals. One way to do this is to run initiatives that open authentic lines of communication across the different generations to begin raising awareness of our differences. This authentic and safe dialogue approach has worked quite successfully in our business and of the clients we have worked with. Through these exchanges, we are learning that there is much more that binds us together as a humanity than we had imagined.

On advising young people – While the system is catching up the unique energy that young people bring to the workplace, it is important that young people pace themselves on their career journey. I would encourage more young people to practice the art of observation and reflection. One of the biggest lessons we can share from experience is the importance of learning and mastering the system you find yourself in first before attempting to conquer it. Once you understand the lay of the land, delivery and action should get you a strong footing for not only *being included*, but also *including yourself* through impactful and tangible contributions.

On what we can start doing tomorrow - Senior leaders and professionals can contribute to youth Inclusion by being intentional about formal and informal mentoring. Bringing a young leader along with you to your meetings offers invaluable exposure. As Deloitte research suggests, diversity without inclusion is not enough (Deloitte, 2018). When solving big business problems, it is important that you include young people in the conversation at ideation stage. Collaborative ideation across generations is a competitive edge for increased innovation. It is only by getting this buy in from the beginning that you will see true leadership and ownership in the solutions that are delivered.

Young professionals are leaders in their own right. It does not matter whether they stay in one organisation overtime or not. What matters is that we live in a changing society that currently needs “all hands-on deck” as we navigate a pandemic and many other competing challenges. An intentional investment on youth inclusion falls within the long-range strategic levers of any organisation that sees itself as a social enterprise with a responsibility towards co-creating a bright future with all its stakeholders.

About the authors:

Dr. Siphokazi J. Ntetha is the Chief of Staff to the CEO of Deloitte Africa Consulting. *She leads the Millennial Council and other initiatives that humanize business. She is an award nominated Organisational Psychologist, Management Consultant and Fulbright Scholar specializing in Organizational Leadership and Change. Siphokazi is passionate about sustaining Africa and her people.*

Tlotlo Letlape is a Senior Consultant delivering technology and process transformations and implementations within the Workday HCM space. *Tlotlo has served as the Millennial Council FY18/19 Deputy Spokesperson and currently serves as a steering committee member of this year’s council. As a young leader within the firm, Tlotlo believes in creating and taking up space as a young black person. As a member of the LGBT community, he works to ensure that representation is present in all spaces he serves.*

Egomaron Jegede is on the Enterprise Technology & Platforms Consulting team in West Africa. *He is a seasoned technology professional with experience cutting across IT/Telecoms infrastructure development, Digital Strategy and Transformation. He served as the Chairperson of the 2018-2019 Deloitte Africa Consulting Millennial Council leading a team of 12 impact makers across Africa to implement firm wide initiatives.*

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