

The old rules no longer apply in HR, and employers must adapt to society's changing values, writes *Tim Metcalfe*

New generation seeks satisfaction



“Another huge myth is that money can solve everything. A lot of business managers think the answer to preventing staff from jumping ship is to throw money at them”

Charles Caldwell
Juniper Networks HR director

THE 40-HOUR WORKING week is not the only myth of modern-day employment. Despite quantum leaps in human resources practices over recent years, it seems employers continue to misunderstand staff.

For example, several recent surveys have revealed that, contrary to popular belief, remuneration is not what matters most to employees. The most valued commodity of all, it emerges, is, in fact, a reasonable amount of free time.

Another common misconception is that the modern workforce expects some form of “social contract”, with employers providing stability of employment.

In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

These are just some of the issues that will be tackled by Charles Caldwell, human resources director for internet hardware specialist Juniper Networks (Hong Kong), when he addresses the conference on “Human Resources Myths in the Asian Century”.

Mr Caldwell has been at the cutting edge of employment trends lately as Juniper's recent phenomenal growth has mirrored Asia's internet boom.

When he joined the company 30 months ago, it employed 100 staff. Today the workforce numbers 800. From a human resources perspective, the transition has been both testing and revealing.

Perhaps most significant of all had been the “huge change in the mindset” among employees over the past five or so years, he noted.

The Asian economic crisis, dot-

com boom and bust, September 11, terrorism from Bali to Europe, Sars and any number of natural disasters that had conspired against life in general were in turn destabilising attitudes to companies and careers, he said.

“When people say the social contract has been broken, the new employment market replies: ‘What social contract? I never signed up for that!’

“[Many people] used to go through life thinking there was a degree of stability but that's no longer the case,” he said. Instead, workers are increasingly adjusting to a “chaos theory” of careers.

Rather than focusing on jobs for life, the more realistic “new career mentality” instead adopts the perspective of achieving a single goal or completing a specific project.

Employees are much less frightened of changing jobs than in days gone by, and a lot of human resources specialists and business people do not understand how much motivations have changed.

Those who make up the new workforce seek to hone their talents, considering each job an opportunity to add to their arsenal of skills.

In support of his argument, Mr Caldwell pointed to emerging evidence from major corporations showing staff turnover as high as 35 per cent annually. In telecom call centres, it can reach 55 per cent.

“Another huge myth is that money can solve everything,” Mr Caldwell said. “A lot of business managers think the answer to preventing staff from jumping ship is to throw money at them.”

The evidence suggests otherwise.

Transition management



Today's job seekers have different requirements from those of their parents, and companies need to be aware of this. Photo: Bloomberg

specialist DBM had cautioned that, as baby boomers continued to mature and retire, generation Xers will come to form the majority of the workforce, forcing businesses to rethink everything from management techniques to remuneration packages.

According to DBM's findings, generation Xers are primarily concerned with finding challenging and interesting roles

and assignments, career development opportunities and more flexible working hours.

“This was the first generation to see their mothers enter the workforce en masse,” a recent DBM survey concluded. “They experienced first-hand the effects of parents working long hours and having less time with their families. As a result, a balanced work-family life is extremely important to them

and many are demanding, even expecting, a work-from-home option from their employer.”

The latest *WorkAsia* study by human resources consultant Watson Wyatt Worldwide found staff commitment was more heavily influenced than before by job satisfaction – having a sense of accomplishment, learning new things and utilising these abilities on the job.

“Tragedies like 9/11 and the tsunami have seriously tested the modern mindset. People are wondering why they are working all these hours and answering e-mails at night. They are asking: Is it all really worth it? With so much uncertainty and volatility around, successful businesses are the ones that prepare for change with corporate cultures that deal with instability,” the study said.

Speak the truth softly to ensure you get heard

HONESTY HAS ALWAYS been the best policy. But as many managers have learned to their cost, the old adage is sometimes forgotten in a crisis.

“Every team and every organisation has problems,” said A.C. Ho, director of organisational consulting at Singapore's Centre for Effective Leadership (Asia).

“The difference between the good and the best is not how many problems they have, but how they discuss and resolve them.”

Rather than avoiding candid dialogue, he suggested: “Your best line of defence against costly

errors, poor performance or dysfunctional teams is a culture where everyone speaks up – where crucial conversations are not avoided but handled frankly and with respect.”

Mr Ho, who delivers flagship programmes on leadership, organisational effectiveness, communications, coaching and talent development, is addressing the topic of “Handling Crucial Conversations” at the Hong Kong Institute of Human Resource Management annual conference.

“When the stakes are high and opinions vary, most people

become emotional,” he observed. “As a natural consequence, their higher-level brain functions shut down and they soon become narrowly focused – usually on the wrong target. Instead of wanting to do what's right, their goals change, often unconsciously, to wanting to win, save face or make others look bad.”

“But remaining focused on what you want out of an interaction helps you achieve the results that really matter.”

The enemy to honest and respectful conversation, he argued, was fear stemming from

the belief that bad things were about to happen.

“If we think our ideas are about to be trampled on and rejected, we tend to try to force our point of view on others. Like it or not, the more significant the issue, the more likely we are to be on our worst behaviour.”

Far better, he counselled, was to combat such natural tendencies by starting with facts, using tentative language and inviting others to share their views. “Softening your stance actually strengthens your credibility,” he argued.