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SEARCH & INTERIM

BUILDING RESILIENCE FOR MILLENNIAL EMPLOYEES

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Contents:

While COVID may have hit our older people hardest physically, it's hit the young hardest mentally. The jokes about millennials being fragile snowflakes are completely inadequate to describe the experience of watching your junior employees crash into depression and burnout. Zoom calls filled with ashen faces and stammered apologies make it clear that this isn't callow selfishness; this is real suffering.

What's happening to our youngest workers – and how can we help them?

Building employees' resilience – the ability to cope with change and crisis – is a challenge HR leaders are facing with all age groups, but particularly with millennials. We asked Group and Senior HR directors across a range of industries about how their millennial employees have shown resilience or lack of resilience during COVID, the specific challenges, and some ideas to address them.

- | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Cruise Ships | 6. Aerospace |
| 2. Food Manufacturing | 7. Industrial Manufacturing |
| 3. Software | 8. Pharmaceuticals |
| 4. Energy | 9. Energy Services |
| 5. Data | 10. Wealth Management |

1. Cruise Ships



Our first contact hails from a particularly hard-hit industry. While her older employees have enjoyed working from home, millennials have struggled with it. “Actually keeping them out of the office has been fairly difficult, because we've been saying that we don't want you in the office, but if you feel you absolutely need to, then yes, you can, as long as you observe the rules and regulations around COVID. They're the people that we've had to focus on the most in terms of having calls about depression, stress and anxiety” she told us.

“We’ve done a lot of workshops; the one that I really like is our 15-minute Power of Positivity workshop, which is all about getting people to think about things differently. We've also done some resilience work. We have a tool that we use for resilience, which gives people a score on various metrics of resilience so they can see what to work on. We've done that for some of the more senior people.”

So is she seeing results from the tool? “It’s a slow burn, to be honest. Maybe on one metric you’ll go up a little bit, but not on all of them.”

Although her company has encouraged employees to take a break, get outside, and get some exercise, she’s encountered resistance: “People know it’s the right thing to do. They just don’t want to do it!”

2. Food Manufacturing



Our second contact says he hasn’t seen such a big difference between millennials and older workers as the press reports, and underlines that millennial workers are also very different in different cultures, such as China and Latin America. It also depends on the company culture; a caring and supportive company culture can obviate the need for specific support for millennials.

However, he says millennials, who may be living in small apartments or still with their parents, have been particularly hard-hit by working from home, and hence have benefited most from initiatives like virtual coffee mornings and resilience training. He’s also introduced “take-a-break Fridays” (with four more planned for 2021) and inserted more breaks between meetings to offset the fact that many people find working from home harder work. The business is also using Insights Discovery provided by a learning and development consultancy to help people understand their personal feelings and areas for improvement. “Anecdotally, our younger people got more out of that than our older employees.”

3. Software



Our third contact says that in a global business, millennials' experiences are very different, depending on the state of COVID in their country, but in most countries their living situations are similarly miserable: "They're living with mates, they're living in small areas, they can't go out very far.

We've tried resilience training, but when you do proper resilience training, to really get the benefit, you've got to get quite deep, because there are some fundamental things which impact an individual's resilience and so we've played it with a light touch. We've talked to managers about recognising the signs of low resilience and how to build that in themselves and their team.

And something we started talking about is to try and make the conversation different. We encourage managers to do really simple stuff, like when you start virtual meetings, don't dive straight into the agenda. Think about the opportunity to connect and be social to help build team bonds.

We're also running a pilot in Europe, moving from generic wellbeing programmes into more personalised wellbeing programmes. We're also doing questionnaires to pick up things like resilience and how people are coping so that we can look at it on a much more individual, granular level to understand, in addition to all the generic things everybody else is doing, is there something specific we can do?

For example, we're working on a programme with working mums, to help support maternity returners, most of whom are millennials.

I don't think there's a silver bullet to this, I think it's lots of different little things which would make a difference. Importantly, we try to keep it at the top of people's minds, not to take the foot off the gas, to make sure we're constantly thinking about this, because it has been going on now for eight months or so. It's easy for managers to think they've done their bit for wellbeing and move on."

He's interviewing people returning to work after recovering from COVID, trying to get a deep understanding of what it really felt like for them and what it feels like to come back to work, in the hopes of working out what specific support can be offered to them and others going forward.

4. Energy



"Maybe we have our heads in the sand", says our HR leader from the energy industry, "or maybe we're too small to segment the various populations, but we've had challenges with all different groups, not just the millennials."

As he's in upstream oil specifically, most of his younger workers are on rigs and at onshore terminals, surrounded by colleagues and mentors, not stuck at home, although that means they face the challenge of being away from family and potentially having to stay away from them for three weeks even if family members are sick. It also tends to be a macho environment where people may feel less free to speak up about their feelings.

With most of his employees living in the north of the northern hemisphere, where daylight is limited, he's had to give permission for people to take a break and go outside during daylight hours. "That shouldn't be something we have to codify, but people needed express permission."

5. Data



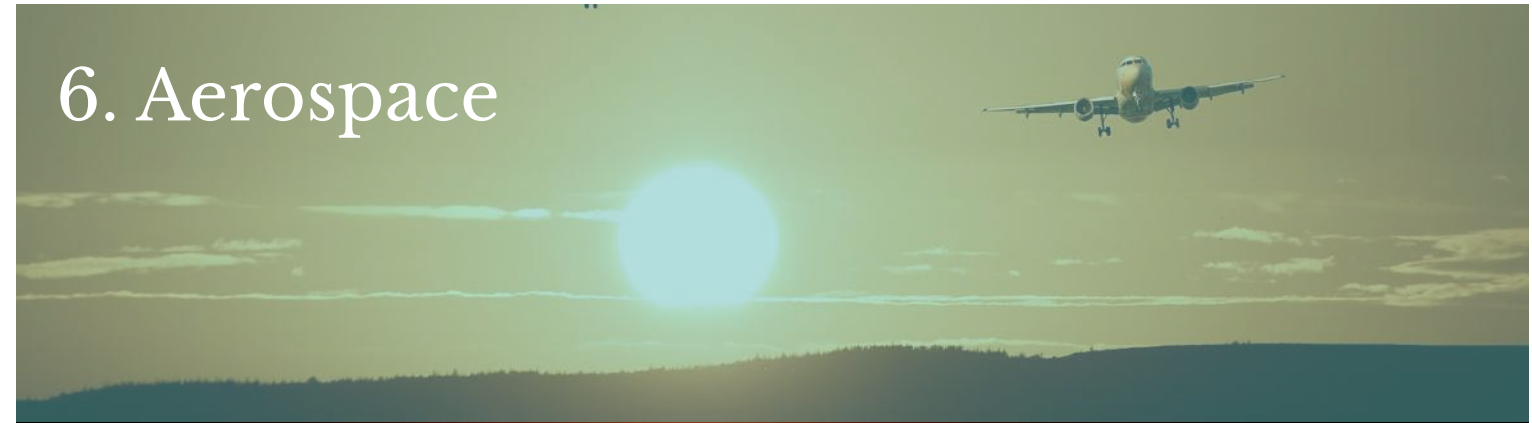
For our contact in the data industry, whose company has a particularly young demographic, this is a prime concern.

“So what are we doing? We’ve done pulse surveys. We have a social workplace platform, which the younger employees love posting on. Annual leave entitlement is unlimited. So we have no policy on annual leave now; you can take 100 days, you can take 10 days, as long as you get your job done. We continue to convey the message: don't feel guilty about not being at your desk. Take calls whilst walking, use your mobile phone, stop sitting in front of a screen all day, try and separate work and home life, because it's really easy now to not separate the two, where your laptop is on 12-14 hours a day. It's OK to be offline. Too much screen time and social media is the greatest cause of depression – for everybody, not just for millennials.

We’re trying to get big on psychological safety and trust: we trust people to get their job done. If you’re in Australia, go to a beach, if you’re in New York, go to a coffee shop if they’re open, and do it there. We’ve also put a lot of thought leadership on our intranet around mental health and physical wellbeing, making sure everyone has the correct work equipment.

We’re all being realistic: we won’t be back in the office until Q3. All the money we’re not spending on foreign travel, we’re investing that back.”

6. Aerospace



“This year, because of the industry that we were in, resilience has been a hot topic in general,” says our aerospace contact. “We’ve just released an eLearning series on resilience that’s been really popular, and we’ve done a huge drive on mental health and mental health awareness, particularly in the UK; that seems to have had a massive effect. We had a realisation last year and the year before that a lot of young men were struggling in particular.

We had a couple of examples before COVID where young male employees had actually reached out and said they were really struggling, that they’d got some seriously dark thoughts and that they needed help and ironically, they went to the HR office and said, ‘I don't know where else to go.’” One of the young men actually credited the HR director, and the access they gave him to mental health support, with saving his life.

This triggered a huge company-wide campaign around mental health before COVID even started. One result was setting up mental health champions trained by a mental health charity to handle mental health emergencies at work.

A background image showing industrial manufacturing equipment, including large metal structures and pipes, with a teal overlay.

7. Industrial Manufacturing

Our manufacturing contact agrees: COVID has had a real impact on emotional wellbeing. “But if you look across the globe, the suicide rates in young men, specifically those from BAME and LGBTQ groups, all of these issues have always been around. All that we've done this year is shine a spotlight on them.

But what we've also done is raised a generation who are not resilient and I put my hand up, because my kids fall into this category. Then you add on any of the additional challenges that certain groups within our communities encounter and you've got a problem stirring up. So I do see the next generation of 20ish-year-olds not having the same level of resilience as maybe we did.

That said suicide rates are increasing, they're not decreasing. It's a lagging indicator. So we will not see the impact of it until 2021 into 2022. But people are generally not coping with a continued lockdown and the continued deaths and the continued negativity coming out of it. It's just that we've also got another generation who are, well, likely to step off.

So we did a lot of research around burnout and we found middle to senior managers are 50% towards burnout. These people are saying that ‘I’m not going to do this anymore. I want to check out. I don't want to go any higher.’ That gives us a real succession problem in about five to 10 years time. They can't cope with the resilience required. They can't cope with the demands. It's a problem that's two, three, four years down the line. We really do have to wise up to mental health.”

She thinks the instant gratification of credit cards and the internet has left younger people less well-equipped to face the COVID crisis, the climate crisis, the social pressures and the increasingly challenging demographic issues they now encounter. “I wouldn't say we've got a perfect storm, but we have a situation that we all need to wake up to, in my humble opinion. But more and more, we are seeing this as an issue. More and more, we are seeing the support that's needed, and the groups that need support most.

You cannot currently access a psychologist, even privately in the whole of West London for something like 12 weeks now. There is no availability. Zero, zilch, nothing and the NHS has waiting lists of about six months.”

In her business, she’s launched an emotional wellbeing strategy (“we don’t call it mental health; we work in some countries where talking about mental health is not just taboo, it's a criminal offence”). They've introduced a worldwide employee assistance programme in local languages, and made it very clear that they cover everything from financial support and guidance to telephone counselling for employees and up to four family members – including for low-level workers in poorer countries, for whom this level of support is unheard-of. This programme has seen massive uptake.”



8. Pharmaceuticals

Our pharmaceuticals contact has taken the step of providing a local-language employee assistance plan for employees in all countries.

“When it comes to millennials”, he says, “the epiphany for me was realising that actually connecting with people and not spending so much time online is essentially the key to so many emotional well-being challenges around the fact that basically the millennials’ pre-frontal cortex hasn’t become as developed as our generation’s, because they haven’t had as much time literally just being able to socialise and develop and build up that resilience in terms of this area of their brain and so we’ve tried to weave this into some management training around connecting with young people. Of course, COVID has provided a perfect structure to do that.

In some of our workshops we’ve had leaders saying, ‘Blimey, I hadn’t realised there was scientific data to support what you’re saying!’”



9. Energy Services

Sadly, our next contact tells us they recently lost an employee to suicide in their 40’s, for non-work-related reasons. The workforce is split between field based individuals, who are mostly “very male and won’t talk to anyone” and younger “more diverse call centre workers.”

“We’ve got an employee assistance (EAP) programme, but that’s completely swamped at the moment. We don’t have many solutions really for the younger employees. The older ones like me are fine working from home. It was the ones in their 20s that are really struggling mental-health-wise. We’ve had people locked down in family units that they realise actually don’t make them happy. We’ve had a lot of people’s marriages breaking up. The traditional tools, the EAP, the support, they’re not enough. We’re at a loss as to what to do to help people.

The HR team is so tired and lethargic I find that I’m increasingly worried about the team as opposed to the organisation, because the team burden is increasing so much in terms of the emotional drain on them.”

10. Wealth Management



“My main priority going in to COVID,” says our last contact. “was to make mental fitness top of my agenda.”

She also avoids the term “mental health”, for a different reason: because she believes the stigma attached to it stops people reaching out. Within her company, it’s now called “mental fitness”, by analogy with physical fitness. As a result she’s found people are a lot more relaxed about this concept and more willing to listen.

On top of this, she has an EAP scheme, occupational health counselling, and 10 mental health first aiders trained up at the beginning of COVID. She’s also been offering resilience training, which has had about 70% uptake. The trainer has suggested giving yourself a rating from one to 10.

“So sometimes it's actually hard to articulate what it is that's bringing you down, what is the problem. So you can just say, ‘How are you feeling on the rating?’ And people have found it easier to say ‘2’ than ‘I'm struggling. I don't know what to do. I’m feeling helpless.’ For me, that's brilliant, because if people are talking, it's helping them.”

The broad sweep across a range of sectors shows the diverse fortunes and challenges that exist within companies and the strides businesses are taking to build resilience in their younger employee base. We hope you find this paper useful in addressing similar challenges within your own organisation.

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