



The Flipside of the Digital Playground: The Case for Reverse Mentoring

By **Amelia Chan**, CPHR

ASKING “WHY” IS NATURAL FOR YOUNG ENQUIRING MINDS. Tireless questioning and unabashed curiosity is something with which we all begin our lives, but perhaps start taking for granted once we “think” we already know the answers.

Undoubtedly, asking questions serves us well as we grow, as does our appreciation for those who provide or guide us towards the answers. However, the younger generations aren’t the only ones who need and benefit from ongoing guidance and mentorship—particularly at a time when the youngest generations have the greatest grasp of the technologies transforming our workplaces and lives.

At no point in the accumulation of life moments and milestones are we ever served by retiring the thinking caps; the need for reinvention and reinvigoration is never “done.”

As much may seem self-evident to HR professionals, yet there is a large contingent within the workplace and society at large who unwittingly subscribe to this thinking. Catchphrases of this community include statements along the lines of: “Technology is a huge time waster” or “I’m too old for...” or “Machines are taking over our lives.”

The Wisdom of Youth

A case for better, “bottom-up” digital sharing is evident. Humans are social creatures who need mental stimulation and interaction to thrive. Digital media’s influence is highlighting the very need society has for cross-generational and cross-cultural communication.

Sharing “space” online demonstrates how information sharing connects (or isolates) us. It also illustrates how true progress requires the connection of people and ideas in an open and

ongoing exchange. In this light and age, reverse mentoring can and does offer a fresh perspective, as well as business potential.

Originally popularized by former GE chair and CEO Jack Welch, reverse mentoring is a relatively new concept which is gaining greater acceptance as the pace of technological change has an ever greater influence on business and the work world. As per Welch’s original insights, reverse mentoring works best when “older” business executives realize they need to learn from the younger set to stay relevant into the future. These flip side mentors come with fresh eyes, open minds and an intuitive affinity with emerging technologies.

A Lifetime of Learning in Progress

As our lives and careers progress, many of us are relieved that the perils we’ve experienced along the way are in the rearview mirror and behind us. The irony is that the more we move forward, the more important it is to look back to assess our situation, gauge progress, and navigate the future.

How we made it out alive and who we are today is because of yesterday. While war stories are better in hindsight, it is an important reminder that we are a product of our experiences—the successes build our confidence and failures build mental and emotional muscle. This is what makes each individual special and unique.

How this applies in our professional life is the key to the proverbial kingdom. We will never stop learning, so we may as well accept it and embrace it. This awareness is a powerful narrative to apply when working with the younger generations. In addition to the more obvious benefits, the Millennials and Gen Z’ers need role models to learn from and with. We all need to learn more about learning.

Leaders Asking Questions Key

Age and even maturity don't necessarily make us wiser, particularly regarding technology. The older generations and their cohorts, while knowledgeable about many things, are starting to realize they don't know everything or have all the answers. This is exactly the type of attitude needed to inspire leadership to learn from the younger set.

Every age group has something to offer and it is the connection and community of sharing that supports authentic engagement. Telling and sharing is caring in action at work. Apathy and withholding is the opposite and leads to the deterioration of relationships. This is why successful workplace cultures capitalize on age diversity and embrace both forward and reverse mentorship.

Whether the employee demographic is mainly one cohort or not, an organization's customer base and society at large includes a varying range of age and life experience. Recognizing this factor in the training and development sphere strengthens an organization's ability to manage the future.

The very frustrations managers are having with their reports will likely be reflected in their customer base, and the missing link is accepting the need to update antiquated notions of "how things work." Business in general and how commerce operates is changing. Experienced managers need to become the students to learn about what is happening as well as around the corner.

Forwarding-Thinking Advantages

Some of the many benefits of reverse mentoring programs include:

- **No more 'us versus them' mentality:** The self-imposed barriers of different age cohort groups are reduced and stronger bounds of rapport are developed;

- **Home grown succession plan:** The younger, tech-savvy high-potentials are fostered through leadership and role modelling of the established executives; and
- **Bridging the generational knowledge gaps:** Older employees learn about social media and its business applications while the younger employee deepens their knowledge of the business and industry practices.

Full impact participation required

So, a belated welcome to the digital media age—social media isn't going away. While the human touch can never be replaced, the tools available to communicate and connect will continue to evolve. Refusing to explore (and adopt) new technology is foolhardy because, like it or not, everything is part of the bigger system. Even small businesses in cottage industries must acknowledge the global marketplace potential of cyberspace in order to survive and grow.

In a recent interview, Elon Musk shared the key to success is to keep moving forward as: "If you're not progressing, you're regressing." While change is difficult, humans have a remarkable ability to adapt, albeit sometimes reluctantly. It is

this active participation which generates the sustainable engagement factor in business.

Flipping the roles from mentor to mentee can be a little disconcerting, but the energy, connection and progress can be rewarding. The bigger payoff is how much closer it brings people together as a team and solidifies a culture of community wherein everyone has something to offer. 

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"If you're not progressing, you're regressing."

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