

Young leaders don't want the top job

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ALLISON DIAZ FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

Inside the cubicles at many workplaces, a strange trend is taking place. Young people don't want to upgrade their cubicle for the corner office. Workplace experts call it "the aspiration gap."

At a time when 10,000 boomers a day are retiring, businesses need young workers to lead their companies into the future. But only 11 percent of millennials said they aspire to senior level positions at their company, found a [recent study](#) by talent management firm [Saba](#) and [WorkplaceTrends.com](#).

[Dan Schawbel](#), founder of [WorkplaceTrends.com](#), says the reason for the aspiration gap among young workers could be simple: "They just don't see the path up."

Emerging from the recession, many companies have focused on recovery and growth rather than training their young workers for leadership positions or communicating career paths. Only 15 percent feel the

training they receive is preparing them for the next position, according to the study, which polled 1,000 human resources professionals and 1,000 workers across age brackets.

“I have to admit, it takes effort,” says Detra Shaw-Wilder, 45, managing partner at her Miami law firm, Kozyak Tropin & Throckmorton, founded in 1983. Since taking over the top job at her firm, once held by senior partners, Shaw-Wilder has become mindful of developing young associates into partners. “We want to look to the future and groom leaders. If we don’t focus on it, and we get busy with the practice of law, I could see where young people could get frustrated.”

Another factor also is at play, explains Ladan Nikravan, senior editor at Human Capital Media Group and author of the Ask a Gen Y blog. “Millennials want fulfillment from work. They don’t feel they have to go straight up. Being CEO might not be their definition of success.”

As a manager of millennials, Mike Prokopeak, vice president and editor of Chief Learning Officer Magazine, says his experience reflects that thinking: “They believe there are other career paths out there that do not consume their lives the way the c-suite would.” Younger workers are looking for more responsibility and higher pay, he says. “But they are OK with having a range of experiences and contributing to results in their own way.”

Experts believe companies are unprepared to deal with this generational shift in attitude toward leadership. Because Gen X is a small generation compared to the others, there simply aren’t enough of them to fill the leadership roles that baby boomers will vacate. Gen Y (millennials) will have to step into those roles faster than in the prior decades — and companies will have to move faster to prepare them.

“Most companies are waiting around,” Schawbel says. “But we see the problem now and think they should start to do something about it before it’s too late.”

Some companies already see signs of a growing talent gap at the executive level. In the survey, 60 percent of HR executives polled said they were struggling to find candidates to fill senior leadership roles. And, in a survey by Human Capital Media Advisory Group, about 76 percent of human resources practitioners said their organizations search outside to fill gaps in the leadership pipeline.

One option might be to rethink leadership development to give young workers more ongoing mentoring, coaching and feedback. EdAssist, a Bright Horizons brand, surveyed millennials and found that most value professional development over regular pay raises. If asked to choose between similar jobs, six in 10 would pick the job with potential for professional development over one with regular pay raises.

Human Capital’s Nikravan says telling a young worker they have potential to be CEO or a company leader in the future doesn’t work for her generation. “Instead of someone saying we have our eye on you,

millennials want leadership training at every stage in their career. They want specific, relevant training on how to succeed in the job they are in and get to the next step.

At her law firm, Shaw-Wilder says she has become mindful about giving leadership opportunities to her younger lawyers early in their careers. For example, she has asked Tal Lifshitz, a young associate, to oversee the firm's summer program this year, and has given him authority over which law students to interview and include. "I can't really give big litigation to a young attorney and let them run with it, but I do look for ways to make sure young attorneys feel important and a valuable part of team."

To be sure, some companies are actively providing opportunities to employees at all levels to learn new skills. Large companies such as ADP, Hilton Worldwide and State Farm received awards in Miami this week at the Chief Learning Officer Symposium for their workforce development strategies. But developing young workers can be particularly tricky at companies where age is seen as an advantage, such as wealth management and financial services firms.

At GSK Wealth Advisors in Miami, founder Jeff Koch, 69, just executed a well thought out succession plan that has been in the works for several years. Koch has handed the leadership of the 12-person firm to Maria Blet, who as CEO will be charged with serving clients, managing the firm, and grooming the next generation of firm management. "That's difficult because in our business, gray hair is good and the pipeline is not as strong as it needs to be," Koch says. As the demand for advice and financial planning continues to increase, Blet's responsibilities will include developing younger wealth managers and luring younger clients. Most businesses built around an entrepreneur have a very difficult time transitioning to the next chapter — and the one after. However, Koch says Blet has a strength that will help her: "She communicates like crazy."

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