

GENERATION Y: BORN TO *BEE* WILD?

DECEMBER 3, 2012

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1

Executive Summary

We all know that honey bees have traditionally been an image for the model employee – the quiet and disciplined worker who we come across less and less. At least the analogy is familiar, even though we may have never realized to what extent it was really true.

You may also have heard that entire swarms of honey bees across the world have been recently affected by the *colony collapse disorder*, a mass disappearance of worker bees from their beehives.

But did we ever think that the symptoms that usually foreshadow these sudden disappearances are the same ones occurring across labor markets, which human resources departments of even the world's best companies are struggling with: locating, engaging and retaining workforce and talent?

And have we ever observed that the behavior of Generation Y (Gen Y) at work, which is so different from previous generations, is actually very similar to the behavior of the wild bees – the cousins of honeybees that are keener on freedom and independence?

In addition to showing great skills of dynamism, creativity and adaptability, wild bees produce as much honey – and better honey – than domestic bees. This suggests that employers and managers should probably reevaluate their approach to Gen Y by reviewing their work styles and values and refraining from trying to “domesticate” their wildness too much if they want to defend their organizations’ adaptability and keep it growing.

2

Context: Workforce and Talent Management Are at the Top of Leaders' Minds

In 2011, Mercer interviewed clients all over the world from various industries to better understand how they were impacted by the shift in working populations and how they responded to it. Clients were asked about their overall business and people strategies, the changes in their workforce and their approach to those changes.

Based on the concerns they had raised, it was clear that finding the right workforce and talent was at the top of their minds. As baby boomers retire, the number one priority will be to keep the business going and secure it for the long term through workforce planning, talent/workforce attraction and retention, knowledge transmission, training and strong leadership. But where it becomes complicated is that the new workforce generation does not seem to respond to the same levers that engaged the older generations for so long. It is more difficult for employers to locate and attract new talent, as well as draw the same levels of involvement and retain them.

This strikes an uncanny resemblance to the sudden disappearance of honey bees across the world, which has been covered quite a lot by the broad public and scientific press over the past few years. As we took a closer look at the bees' world, we realized that the common metaphor between bees and workers was much more significant and up to date than what we may have initially thought.

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Domestic Bees Embody the Traditional Way of Working

It is not breaking news that the lifecycle of a domestic bee (also called honeybee or *Apis Mellifica*) compares with what is traditionally expected from employees – and there are several reasons why.

Honey bees live within a society and put the good of the colony before their self-interest. They are dedicated to their work and never deviate from their task – which is, more or less, what companies traditionally expect from the ideal employee. Honey bees typically spend their whole life with the same hive, similar to how role-model employees stay faithful to their company their entire career.

Honey bees are known for respecting the strong hierarchy within the colony: there is the queen, that is dedicated to laying eggs, the workers (females) and the drones (males) with their main role to fecundate the queen. It is tempting to make a parallel with organizations where a CEO secures the future of the organization, sales professionals facilitate business introductions and deals so that the business grows, and then other employees in the middle and back office perform the work and keep the company going.

With 2,000 eggs laid everyday by the queen and raised by the nanny bees, a healthy hive can be pretty confident in its future labor pipeline. Similarly, companies in the industrial world have been used to an almost unlimited talent supply for many years.

Honey bees have a well-patterned work cycle. From the day they are born to day 4, their role is to clean and ensure proper hive keeping. From day 5 to day 10, they serve as nannies for the larvae, feeding them with royal jelly. From day 11 until day 13, they are promoted to storekeepers that guard and aerate the hive's stock of pollen. Between day 14 and 17, they act as building bees by constructing the alveolus, the cell of a honeycomb, with their wax. From day 18 to day 21, their role is to be the sentinels of the hive, keeping it secure from unwanted insects. Finally, from day 22 until death, at about 45 days, they fly away to collect pollen and nectar, and bring it back to the hive to feed the colony. In a sense, it's quite similar to the traditional employee life cycle: linear, clearly patterned and regularly paced.

The younger bees' role is to keep the hive's structure working and clear of any issues, so that the older bees can focus on doing their job, which is bringing the pollen back to the hive and feeding the younger bees. Again, in the traditional leverage model of many organizations, the most junior ones shoot trouble away and manage the straightforward accounts and projects,

while the more senior employees care for the most strategic and complex ones, which ensures parallel intellectual capital transmission to the younger colleagues through mentoring or team work.

A last comparison? An interesting behavior of bees is that they defend the hive's entrance from unwanted insects, including the drones (male bees), once they have fecundated the queen. Indeed, the drones are no longer considered productive and useful to the colony. In some ways, doesn't it remind us of when certain organizations could afford to dismiss employees with minor "spots" (not as productive as other employees, older, disabled, weighed down with family responsibilities, etc.), and are now forced to consider bringing them back due to demand pressure?

4

Colony Collapse Disorder – A Decline in the Global Working Population

A huge proportion of the global population of domestic bees has disappeared in recent decades. Their number started to decrease in the mid-70s, due to global urbanization and beekeepers going on retirement. This mostly occurred in Europe and in the US, with a few Asian and South American species also affected. Then, starting in 2006, sudden rashes of disappearances were observed and entire swarms were decimated. This phenomenon – which scientists call the *colony collapse disorder* – is believed to be caused by pesticides and an aggressive virus.

Interestingly, this compares closely with what is happening in the workplace: as birth rates decrease and baby boomers go on retirement, the total working population has been shrinking in many developed countries, mostly in Europe and the US. Regular waves of retirement and a shallower mid-management layer have led to a scarce talent supply in some places and specializations. The same evolution is expected to occur in Asia soon and in Latin America in the future.

The *colony collapse disorder* is a topic of concern for governments. Bees are known as the “sentinels of the environment,” a relationship that Albert Einstein made famous when he said that “if the bee disappears from the surface of the Earth, man would have no more than four years left to live.” On the business side, talent scarcity has been the number one concern of CEOs in the last few years, as it clearly jeopardizes the performance of their organizations – which ultimately impacts the sustained competitiveness of the economies at a macroeconomic level.

Beekeepers can detect symptoms that usually signal *colony collapse disorder*. It turns out that quite similar symptoms are present in the workforce.

The first symptom is the ratio between worker bees and brood, a young group of bees that need to be fed and cared for. In colonies threatened by a rapid collapse, the workforce is insufficient to maintain the brood.

Doesn't it recall the struggle that companies are facing with knowledge and skills transfer? With massive waves of retirement, many companies are either experiencing or anticipating their intellectual capital escaping with the retirees, and younger colleagues lack the necessary skills for succession.

The second symptom of endangered swarms is when their workforce consists of more young adult bees than mature bees. The same situation may not exactly be found at companies now, yet the trend is showing. Indeed, in many countries and industries, companies show bar-bell shaped demographics with an aging population at the one extremity of the age pyramid (of the bar-bell) and a younger workforce coming on board at the other end, as the mid-age layer of talent is insufficient for companies to source from. As older employees retire and young people enter the workforce, companies will see their staff get younger on average in the mid- to long-term.

The third symptom of the *colony collapse disorder* is when bees become reluctant to consume their usual food, typically sugar syrup and protein supplements. Baby boomers and Gen X managers would probably respond to traditional work incentives. However, to the greatest disappointment of many employers, Gen Y employees do not seem to react to the same levers of engagement as their elders. They have very different expectations from work, for instance, they are much less keen on making a career in the traditional way, where they climb up the hierarchical ladder. Instead they prefer trying different work experiences in their lives. They do not aspire to leadership that much, and prefer independence or collaborative ways of working.

Besides the *colony collapse disorder* (or maybe another precursor of it), beekeepers have also been observing other unusual and disorientating facts. Among them is the fact that the flight of bees is no longer recognizable to beekeepers. Perhaps this is similar to Gen Y's vision, values and behavior, in which employees no longer recognize the patterns they had observed with older generations? Secondly, there are capped broods (that is, broods that have been fed and are about to be born) in abandoned colonies. Could this be similar to the companies that lack leadership and management skills? Thirdly, there are hives where there is a queen bee, yet no workers around. A parallel to CEOs of companies that have jobs to get done, but cannot find the workforce to do them?

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Born to *Bee* Wild? Gen Y's Behaviors Compare With Wild Bees, Suggesting New Approaches to Talent Management

While the previous observations sound rather pessimistic and scary with regard to the future of the global workforce, there is also another side to the story – an unexpected, surprising and encouraging aspect to it: It appears that the Gen Y's behaviors compare closely with those of the wild bees'. Wild bees actually seem to be to honeybees what Gen Y workers are to baby boomers and Gen X workers. And when we know all that the wild bees are capable of, it gets really interesting.

Let's discover more about wild bees. A primary feature about them is that there are more than 2,000 species, which makes them much more diverse than domestic bees. Unlike domestic bees, which tend to fly in patterned areas close to the hive, wild bees have a much broader perimeter and they tend to fly wherever they want. They typically pick up pollen from a wide variety of sources, although some species have specialized in a flower family. Wild bees can make a nest of almost anything, such as tree cavities, roofs and shells. And, unlike their domestic peers, they don't stick to the same nest all their life.

A number of species among wild bees are solitary and don't live in a colony – although some of them regroup in communities by building their nests close to one another. Since they are on their own, they build their nests by themselves. Solitary bees do not produce honey or wax, but they are still key contributors in sustained biodiversity and differentiate themselves as great pollinators. Wild solitary bees also differ from other bees in that all females are fertile, so there is no distinction between the queen and the workers.

Now, let's compare with Gen Y. The first thing we notice about this generation at work is that it has become the most diverse generation ever in the workplace due to globalization, workforce movements, increasing ratio of women at work and a broader acceptance of minorities at work. Gen Y is also a workforce group that is difficult to attract and retain. Committed to themselves and to their desires more than to their employer and a traditional career path, they "fly" where they want, and change companies every two to three years on average. They value a variety of experiences in life: not only in various companies, locations, positions, but also different kinds of occupations over a lifetime, alternative work and sabbatical periods, and a work-life balance. In a way, this is similar to the wild bees that pick up pollen from different species of flowers and change nests several times in a lifetime.

A growing proportion of Gen Y members, and probably even more in the Millennium generation, are or plan on becoming self-employed. They look for independence and flexibility. They have a lot of energy and self-confidence. They just can't imagine themselves following the same patterns as their parents and having to abide by the corporate world's rules. They enjoy flat organizations more than pyramidal hierarchies and collaboration more than authority. They want to do a job that they like and create the kind of professional life that fits around their lifestyle. Just like wild bees, which make their nests themselves with whatever seems convenient to them, after a while they leave their job for another one.

And like some of the wild solitary bees that still aggregate by building their nests close to one another, Gen Y individuals are very independent on the one hand, but on the other hand, grant a lot of importance to social networks.

Gen Y employees may *seem* to contribute less to the corporate world than the older generations, but they actually bring a lot of dynamism and creativity to the global labor market as a whole. And just like wild bees, their contributions to the organization are as strong – if not stronger – than their elders. As a matter of fact, wild social bees prove to be as productive as domestic ones; the reason why they seem to bring less honey to the honey-makers is because their natural nests have limited capacities, whereas hives provide more room for honey storage. As some beekeepers say, enlarge the nest and you shall get more honey. Wild bees are also more intense pollinators than their domestic cousins. Interestingly, it has been proven that the presence of wild bees close to domestic bees improves the pollinator productivity of domestic bees by five times.

This gives employers some very interesting perspectives in the era of the race for productivity. Because technology was evolving over the past decades, and younger generations entering the workplace were pushing their employers for even more technology, productivity was increasing rapidly. But another factor explains this shift: The cultural difference between generations – and therefore, their approach to work – directly impacts their added-value. In general, baby boomers take pride in dedicating themselves to the company, without counting the hours, like honey bees to the hive. They will typically bring their knowledge, their technique, their interpersonal skills, and their attention to detail to a project or a team. “On the contrary, Gen Y members actively seek work-life balance: the faster the work is done, the earlier they can pursue other personal interests and enjoy their lives. Efficiency is, therefore, a sought-after quality and they use all means to maximize it: tools, communication channels, communication modes (the flight of bees being a way of communicating to their peers, which flight experts no longer recognize), flexibility (like adapting oneself to different nests), ways of sourcing and sharing information (such as gathering nectar), etc. On top of it, since work has to be fun for them, they are always willing to try and implement creative ideas to increase efficiency. These gains in productivity actually benefit the whole community and impact the way all the generations in the company (wild bees and domestic bees) work. As the older generations adopt the new ways of working, they increase their productivity, as well as provide feedback based on their knowledge and needs, which helps establish a virtuous process of continuous improvement.

The increased productivity brought by the combination of different generations also suggests a two-way approach to mentoring initiatives, in which mentors derive as much benefit from the relationship as the mentees do. The elder colleague educates the younger one on knowledge, know-how, all the aspects of work and client relationships that are not taught in the classroom and the younger colleague helps the older one understand his generation's approach to work, shares insights on their expectations in terms of management, career, jobs roles and updates him on the latest technologies. It's a win-win combination for all employees as well as the company.

Not only do wild bees bring substantial gains of productivity, they also produce more qualitative honey (thanks to more diverse and purer sources) and more qualitative wax (all natural wax that is regularly renewed). Again, the metaphor could be endlessly extended, with employees hopping from one job or an industry to another, they contribute by bringing fresh perspectives and help renew ideas and approaches.

Last but not least, another key benefit brought by wild bees, which is very dear to the heart of all agriculturists and botanists, is that the vegetal productions pollinated by wild bees prove to be more resistant and productive than those pollinated by domestic bees.

As for the wild solitary bees, which do not produce honey or wax, they are also key contributors to the system and great pollinators, and differentiate themselves by playing a significant role in sustained biodiversity.

This calls for companies to reflect on what they should ultimately aim for: is it to live just by themselves, or is it to contribute to an overall healthier and dynamic system they would also benefit from? In other words, shouldn't we move from a shareholder focus (all bees dedicated to a controlled production of honey) to more stakeholder focus – a systemic approach to business with a real ambition to put shareholders, people and clients (honey, bees and biodiversity) in a good balance? Can the companies only afford to keep a shareholder focus when talent is circulating quickly, seeking meaningful accomplishments and playing a more powerful role in the labor market equation? Taking the stakeholder focus may shed some of the old rules and leverage the "wildness" of the workforce to reach a more sustainable and beneficial economic environment.

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Further Questions

Like domestic bees, wild bees have also been impacted by urbanization and pesticides, but in proportions that are more difficult to evaluate.

In light of the comparison between wild bees and Gen Y, it is particularly interesting to know that the domestication of bees itself – with the subsequent decrease in diversity of species and the fact that honey-makers systematically remove the honey from the hive before the bees have an opportunity to feed themselves with it and strengthen their immune system – is believed to have widely caused their weak resistance to environmental changes and diseases. As the paradigms of the world of business are changing, adaptation skills will be key. However, companies are holding strongly to what has worked for decades, they probably don't want to reduce their preparedness and jeopardize growth and innovation by an extreme adversity to risk applied to workforce management.

Human beings can never completely domesticate bees, we can mostly manage them. Like most other animal species, wild-born bees rarely become domestic bees. But unlike most of the other animal species, domestic bees can become wild bees – which are then known as feral swarms. Probably another thing our leaders can meditate on.

APPENDIX A

Sources

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