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Managers versus Digital Natives Employees. A Study Regarding the Perceptions of the Romanian Managers Working with Youngsters

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Abstract. *During the last few years the concerns regarding the youth in the European Union have become a topic of high interest for the European Commission. The official data gathered by the European authorities show that the early school leaving and youth unemployment, coined under the umbrella term of NEETs phenomena, plague the young generation, thing which, along with the aging of the population, gives rise to many questions related to the future of the European construct in terms of economic evolution. Some authors have written since the 90s about the emergence of a new generation, comprising of people born roughly between the 1980s and the year 2000, who are digitally savvy and seem to embrace a different life outlook than the previous generations. In Romania academics and the media have become interested in this generation not because of their prolific activities and professional success, but because many of them seem to lack the desire to take a job or to invest in a solid career. Previous studies have shown that there are indeed digital natives who seem to be extremely proficient with technology, innovative, problem solvers who bring increased profit to the companies they work for, but also that there is another category of youngsters who expect much from their managers and from the companies they work for, in terms of salary and work conditions, but who are not well prepared professionally and who are not ready to respect the discipline required by their employers. The present study has the objective to reveal what Romanian managers think about the young employees (the so called digital natives) and about the prospective employees belonging to the same generation. Data has been collected using in depth interviews with Romanian managers who are currently working with digital natives and with managers who recruit youngsters. The results show that there is a remarkable gap between various groups in this generation. There seem to be two large categories of young employees: the ones who are professionally well equipped, willing to improve their lot and working to find the best ways to do their tasks, and others who seem to be always chasing for a dream in the professional realm but never manage to respect and follow the rules that would help them make it real.*

Keywords: *digital natives, European Union, generation Y, managers, NEETs, Romania.*

Introduction

Currently, about 14 million young people in EU aged 15 to 29 are not pursuing education, are not employed, and are not in training, meaning they are NEETs (Europa.eu, 2012). Some regions and countries in Europe confront with more difficult situations, such as Greece, where over 59% of the youngsters are NEETs (***, 2013a), while other countries are close to the EU average or even below this rate, such as Romania, with 23.9% (Crăciun, 2014). The situation is not a promising one for the future of the European economy, as these people seem unable to properly replace the retiring workforce.

NEETs are among the most vulnerable groups in EU as long as they have difficulties finding a job at the moment and they probably will remain unable to find a suitable job for they do not seek to develop their skills or acquire new ones via formal education or training, nor via other forms of education (Europa.eu, 2013, p.12). Some of these people have become NEETs by leaving education before completing upper secondary education, without which young people are labelled early school leavers who, as the data shows, have significantly lower chances to find their place on the job market (Europa.eu, 2013, p.11) thus fewer chances to become financially independent from their families. The European average for early school leaving, an indicator which shows how many people aged 18 to 24 have left formal training before graduating, was 13.9% in 2013 but the official representatives aim to achieve a less than 10% rate by 2020 (Europa.eu, 2013). The same source shows that Romania is plagued by this phenomenon more than other countries in the EU. In the year 2000 22.9% of the youngsters abandoned school, while in 2013 the numbers lowered to 17.3%. This situation positions Romania on the fourth place in the EU 2013 early school leaving top, after Spain (23.5%), Malta (20.9%) and Portugal (19.2%) (Europa.eu, 2013).

Unemployment in EU correlates with younger age (below 25), a report (Europa.eu, n.d.a.) showing that on average „people are 2.5 times more likely to be unemployed if they are under 25 than if they are an adult worker”, while in Sweden youth are 4 times more likely than adults to be unemployed and 3 times more likely to be unemployed in the United Kingdom, Belgium and Poland. The current state of the matter regarding the youth in the EU has lead both national governments and European institutions to launch, during the last three years, in a quest to find working solutions to this situation by creating alternative educational programs in order to help youngsters develop skills needed on the job market and partnerships between the public

sector, the private sector and the social partners, with the purpose of creating jobs for these people.

The European Commission has developed specific programs that address this issue at the EU level: the EU Youth Strategy, the Youth Guarantee (Europa.eu, n.d.b), and Erasmus+, yet there is tremendous work to be done. These three initiatives most often cite as a cause the situation the failure of the traditional educational system to provide youngsters with proper training that would enable them to find employment and build for themselves proper careers. The economic crisis has also been considered to be a cause for their seeming lack of or partial integration on the job market. The Romanian press has even introduced the concept of „the lost generation” when speaking of the youngsters, citing alarming rates of early school leaving, of people who never apply for training after high school and of people who fail to find a job in the field of expertise after graduating from faculty (***, 2013b) as representatives belonging to the same pandemonium unfolding its dark powers over the national economy. The educational systems’ performance levels in various EU countries could be a cause for young people leaving school and/ or not finding a job after graduating formal education, as they were not provided with the proper training for the existing jobs, thus the large number of NEETs could be a product of elders’ mistakes. However, more and more voices speak of the existence of another cause for the situation, which evokes above all else the difference between values and motivations of the existing generations (Mitan, 2014).

Literature review

A generational gap can be identified between the people born since the early 80s to the years 2000 and the previous generation, the differences being obvious in the professional arena where usually mature managers meet (sometimes much) younger employees. The gen Y, the Millennials, the Generation Me, or the digital natives (Hansen & Leuty, 2012; Huntley, 2006; Prensky, 2001; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman & Lance, 2010) who are now young employees seem to refuse living in an analogous society and use digital technology in almost every activity they start, be it for work or for entertainment (Cable, 2005; Dagnaud, 2011; Gansky, 2011; Zandt, 2010; Weiler, 2004), and this has been said to be the main reason of the frictions between them and one possible explanation for the NEETs phenomenon.

By 2025 about 75% of the workforce worldwide will be members of this generation (Nikravan, 2013) and the fact that many managers, at least in Romania (54% in 2014 according to Doru Dima, career counsellor), state

that it is difficult to hire young people for the open positions they have because they hardly fit the needed profiles, and about 66% of the youngsters wish to invent their own positions at work raises many questions. A research conducted in Romania (Mitan, 2014) has given further insight showing that as employees and candidates, the youngsters tend to expect their activity at work and their relation with their managers to be very different than it actually is and that it has little to do with ITC. Let us explain further what these differences comprise of and to reveal some of the reasons why these differences appear in the first place.

Youngsters today are opinionated and they have little respect for formal authority (Rainie, 2006). Indeed, they are living in a digitalized world that has a few particularities that elder people do not completely understand (Helsper, 2010) and they are much afflicted by the consumerism, the globalization and the current media development (Barna, 1995; Noble, Haytko & Phillips, 2009). More important though, is that they have little respect for old ways of problem solving and want to make their way to the top of the society by doing what they want, when they want it and how they want it (Leonte, 2014; Mihalcea, Mitan & Vițelar, 2012). This topic is related to the values they cherish most, that motivate them to act in certain manners, mostly by rejecting authority and seeking to gain social influence and recognition versus considering security and tradition as means to lead a fulfilled life, like their ancestors did in the recent past (Mitan, 2014).

What are those values that make youngsters act differently? Tapscott (2010) identified eight values/ attitudes that these people cherish and promote in their daily lives: they thrive for freedom and they want everything to be customizable, they prefer to work in teams and dislike hierarchy, they are innovative and appreciate technology, they want everything to happen now – they are not patient, and they prefer to work on things that make them feel good rather than on things that would help them become rich. They choose to work for companies that would help them work both on their personal and professional development and they tend to prefer those companies that are responsible social actors. It is interesting to note that cultural differences are erased by these characteristics (GfK studies presented in Calei, 2013). Within the digital natives' generation, however, groups with distinct characteristics can be identified (Zur & Zur, 2012): some are avoiders or minimalists, not interested much in technology and new media although they can use every new device if need be, but most are enthusiasts (and this group is the largest), comprising of people who cannot imagine life without ITC, and few are not aware of what technology can be used for and expect the world to change in order to accommodate them (Mitan, 2014).

The study *The Coming of Age of Digital Natives* (Calei, 2013) conducted by GfK in Romania has extracted even more insights regarding these people: they tend to prefer speed over depth and they believe in the principle *first come, first served*, but they are also lazy, superficial and insecure. They tend to heavily rely on their friends for emotional support and in order to feed their need of belonging and to feel the world is a stable and welcoming place. The Internet and mainly the Social Network Sites help them maintain contact with their group of friends, while their fascination with technology is only there because technology provides them with means to be connected with these friends all the time. These results do not undermine the wide spread idea that gen Y members are tech savvy but merely show that the reason why they are so is not necessarily connected to their desire to conquer new frontiers but a desire to feel connected to other people. Further, we understand that gen Y employees who are fond of technology are able to collect and make sense of information in a fast pace and they can mobilize their network in order to achieve the best results, as they like collaborative networks (Nayar, 2013). Nayar continues by saying that managers could benefit from creating horizontal networks with employees from various areas of expertise, tackling the problem of structure versus flexibility in an organizational setting.

Other authors have already underlined the different needs gen Y has regarding management. For example, Nikravan (2013) claims that youngsters are over-optimistic and sometimes ignorant, that „they need consistent feedback and positive reinforcement with a clearly defined understanding of accountability”. It is indeed true that youngsters expect much from their managers: they believe their superiors can fulfil most of their expectancies by always addressing their needs (Coca in Calei, 2013; Leonte, 2014). However, it seems that managers not always know how to lead gen Y members to success, and some of the most visible errors are the following: managers feel their authority is threatened by the freedom loving gen Y employees, they try to tell, not show their employees what they want them to do, they expect gen Y employees to change their job many times and they fail to understand that these youngsters, although keen on modern ITC device use, have few skills needed to operate other devices (McBride, 2013).

Moreover, managers seem to expect different things from gen Y workers than these people think they are expected to do, a recent study (Giang, 2013) shows. The pace at which activities need to be done is fast, there are many responsibilities and little time. Gen Y employees want to be promoted and/or rewarded when they accomplish specific goals and they do not understand that their managers actually expect them to do more than they were hired to. Another study reveals that gen Y employees believe that

managers „can offer experience (59%), wisdom (41%), and a willingness to mentor (33%)”, while managers have a mostly negative view of their gen Y employees, believing that „they have unrealistic compensation expectations (51%), a poor work ethic (47%), and are easily distracted (46%)” (Millennialbranding, 2013). Possible solutions have been shown (Mitan, 2014; Nikravan, 2013): managers should provide structure and objectives to them, while patiently allowing them to enjoy freedom and flexibility and investing more in open communication with them.

Methodology

Given these data, we aimed to find what are the perceptions of Romanian managers working with digital native employees in order to extract the main specific qualities they perceive these people have and also to understand what are the main issues they seem to face when working with them. The main research questions was: *What do Romanian managers think of young employees?*

Our research objectives were as following: *01*: to investigate the way managers perceive young employees’ level of professionalism; *02*: to investigate the way managers perceive young employees’ attitude at work towards co-workers; *03*: to investigate the way managers perceive young employees’ attitude at work towards managers; *04*: to investigate the way managers perceive young employees’ demands from their managers; *05*: to investigate the way managers perceive young employees’ demands from the companies they work for.

In February and March 2015 we conducted in depth interviews with 7 Romanian managers currently working with digital native employees and/or who have been in the position of selecting and hiring employees within this age gap during the last two years. Our respondents (5 men and 2 women) have been working in various management positions, from low management (3) and middle-management (3) to CEO (1) within companies in cosmetics industry, banking and training/ non-formal education for 4 to 19 years.

Results and discussion

In contrast with the perspective given by most of the authors cited above, that points to problems that arise when gen Y employees meet the demands of (usually elder) managers, our respondents seem to have found how to

step onto the bridge that helps them achieve the results they expect in the work field. Most of the responses we gathered present the gen Y members of the companies they work for as employees they are content working with although they seem to need more trust and freedom from their direct supervisors than elder employees, in order to perform well. One manager underlined that „(t)hey are dedicated to their job if you know how to make them understand they need to obey you. But this will not happen by force or coercion. If you use the „lead by example” approach you seduce them and they become themselves proactive” (C., m., CEO, 32 y.o.).

Also, it seems that „(t)hey are motivated to grow and they understand work as a means to achieve this. They are well balanced people but as much as their age and their need to experiment by themselves certain situations allow them to be” (C., m., CEO, 32 y.o.). Perhaps due to their young age, „they sometimes seem to lose their grasp on reality when they are faced with a crisis situation” (L., m., middle-management, 53 y.o.), but „they tend to mobilize their resources and react well when they fail, trying to see what went wrong and learn from that” (A., m., low management, 42 y.o.).

They wish to invest much in „improving themselves both on a personal and on a professional level” (A., m., low management, 42 y.o.), but sometimes they are not able to understand what the limits are between what they are supposed to do for themselves, what the others are supposed to do for them and what they are supposed to do for the others. This is why, regarding their level of politeness, willingness to respect etiquette and will to maintain a balanced relationship between giving and taking within the working environment, most of our respondents said they are rather polite and friendly but do not give as much as they expect to receive in term of human relations. Sometimes they even believe that what their colleagues and managers do in order to help them, as personal favors, are „actual obligations of these people towards them, considering that their will to improve their lot should urge all the others to help them in their personal quests” (L., m., middle-management, 53 y.o.).

Sometimes they are described as passive employees, who „do not make efforts to do more than they are asked to by their superiors” (A., m., low management, 42 y.o.). Other times they seem to be „rather superficial in their work approach” (L., m., middle-management, 53 y.o.). However, when they see the goal of the activities they do and when they feel supported and appreciated by the managers and by their colleagues, they tend to become creative and to give much back to the company in terms of dedication and results (C., m., CEO, 32 y.o.; L.I., f., middle-management, 48 y.o.; E., f., low management, 53 y.o. and A., m., low management, 42 y.o. said so in various

forms). Also, „they like to benefit from increased freedom in decision making processes concerning issues that are in their area of expertise” (C., m., CEO, 32 y.o.) and this approach, although not easily embraced by all managers, as L.I. recognizes, „makes them feel they are important to the people they work with and to the company at large” (L.I., f., middle-management, 48 y.o.).

As preferred way to work, „(t)hey do what they are asked to with fair professionalism but they do not like to follow a fixed program” (S., m., middle-management, 36 y.o.) and „they usually reject the old way of doing something even if this might prove to be time consuming and frustrating in terms of results even for them” (E., f. low management, 53 y.o.). They seem to prefer to use ITC devices and are very open to what is new in this domain that could help them become more efficient at work but sometimes they refuse anything that seems „dusty”, sais L.I. (f., middle-management, 48 y.o.), who also states that „they believe anything can be improved and become impatient if they do not perceive that managers welcome this idea”. In fact, they are constantly trying to identify better means to solve problems and they can become innovative if allowed, but they have to feel motivated to do so, or they will not achieve great performance (S., m., middle-management, 36 y.o.).

As regarding the way managers perceive their gen Y employees’ self-image, they generally have a good level of self-trust and a good self-image (all our respondents agree) but they do not feel respected by elder people, be those people work colleagues from the same company or people they meet during business activities (V., m., low management, 46 y.o.) and „they feel they could offer much more than they are allowed to” (C., m., CEO, 32 y.o.). But although they do not always feel respected and do not feel their true potential is released, „they are the ultimate team players” (S., m., middle-management, 36 y.o.). „They tend to choose their objectives by themselves and use teamwork in order to reach these goals”, believing „that they have not given everything they could and have not arrived as far as they can yet” (sais L., m., middle-management, 53 y.o., who also believes that these people tend to be overly optimistic and dream too much about what they can earn in life). In the work environment they do not create disruption, as „they listen to their direct managers’ demands and try to efficiently do their tasks in order to go back to their personal stuff afterwards” (C., m., CEO, 32 y.o.).

They work responsibly to achieve their goals and they welcome distant supervision, as they like to feel they are trusted to make their own decisions, although they need to know that they can ask their direct supervision for advice at any time (C., m., CEO, 32 y.o.). Mentorship is something they expect to receive from their managers but in a non-intrusive way. They prefer to

come themselves to the manager and ask for advice when they feel the need to and mostly dislike managers telling them they are wrong at some point. Most of the managers we interviewed said that in fact they know much about the personal lives of their team members and that they have given advice on personal matters to employees but that they were asked to do that in a discreet and rather indirect manner. At an intimate level, in their search for truth and self-mastery, gen Y employees only respect the hierarchy based upon competencies (V., m., low management, 46 y.o.; L., m., middle-management, 53 y.o.) but do not undermine the existing formal hierarchy (L., m., middle-management, 53 y.o., A., m., low management, 42 y.o.). This preference for competent people has also been pointed by E. (f., low management, 53 y.o.) as the reason why in the company she works for some managers in other departments are seen as mentors by colleagues in other areas of expertise.

And if managers feel they are respected only if they are competent and lead by the „show them how to do something and then ask them to do that themselves” approach, the companies seem to face their rather high demands. This study confirms the results of Tapscott’s investigations showing that youngsters who work believe „the power of a company is condensed in its capacity to respect all its engagements” (C., m., CEO, 32 y.o.), asking for truthfulness and transparency from the companies. However, the demands related to the working conditions they ask for seem fair to all but one manager, who believes „these people seem to desire more all the time, no matter how good the things they already have are” (L., m., middle-management, 53 y.o.), a thing which, he believes, is natural as it leads to progress but also becomes a reason of complaining for those employees who miss to reach their objectives and then try to find something to blame for their mistakes or lack of dedication.

Speaking about the problems that managers face when working with gen Y’ers, E. (f., low management, 53 y.o.) evoked a few episodes with a female co-worker in this age group who seems to be unable to learn all the characteristics of the products she is supposed to sell. The manager says the employee „is too dreamy, promises much but fails to deliver and then complains to upper management she has too much work to do, while she really does not try much”. There seems to be a more profound issue, believes E., with the fact that on the same position the company had another gen Y’er before, who did the same mistakes and „used the company as a gateway to a better position in [another similar company name]”, stressing the fact that attention, capacity to work and loyalty have not been as high as it was expected from young employees during the last few years. Another more mature manager (L., m., middle-management, 53 y.o.) insists upon the fact

that „they are young and they believe they are right and wish to do what they believe to be correct although you tell and demonstrate to them they are wrong. And then they are angry at you because their way of solving things failed them”, but he blames the young age for this type of behaviour. Both E. and L. and also L.I., A. and S. have been faced with young employees leaving the companies they work for after a relatively short period of time but none of them complained about this fact. Actually, S. and L.I. said that even though the process of recruiting and training new employees is time consuming and they would prefer not to be necessary to make changes in the teams they work with, they prefer this situation better than keeping employees who seem to „suck the good disposition from the other members with their continuous complains and criticism towards the management of the company” (L.I.). All five managers who remembered having gen Y employees who left the companies said they did so after a relatively short period of time (up to maximum 2 years) and they did not felt they had to make special moves to keep them in the company because they were already creating more problems than bringing solutions.

Conclusion

As seen above, the Romanian managers working with gen Y employees understand there are a few characteristics that these people share: they are well prepared professionally (or otherwise the managers would not choose to work with them), they are team oriented, they seek to improve their level of knowledge and their personal skills, although sometimes this means they ask much from their colleagues and managers, and they ask for mentorship from their direct managers but still they want to establish their own goals and to follow their own agendas.

Managers we interviewed seemed to consider their demands fair, although some have pointed that youngsters have a tendency to always ask for something better and expect to receive something better when they accomplish their tasks. There seem to be two types of gen Y employees: the ones that fit the profile the companies search for, who manage to balance their particular needs with the ones that the company has regarding their work achievements, even if this means that compromises have to be made both by the companies and the employees, and the ones that do not seem to belong with the company, who do not manage to have good results and who, as a consequence, leave the company.

From what we observed, these managers have a fairly balanced view on the gen Y and are not negativistic, actually welcoming these people as part of

their teams and willing to adapt to their particularities regarding work pace, preferred work conditions and desire for subtle mentoring. They also understand well the need for freedom the youngsters have and salute their necessity to work with professionally capable superiors and their demands of transparency and correctitude from the companies that hire them. The NEETs are, perhaps, a group of people these managers did not come to meet in the workplace or the NEETs are the people who failed the interviews or the people who were never called to attend the interview because they did not seem prepared enough for the jobs. All the managers we interviewed work with youngsters who attended college or have insisted that their team members attend college, a thing that the young employees did in some cases, as L. remembers, and this actually transforms them in agents who could reduce the number of young people who lack perspective in their careers. Further studies would be necessary in order to learn how this process develops.

The young employees who did not meet the criteria imposed by the companies and the managers in terms of quality management have left the companies these managers work with at their will or with the agreement of both parties, and the managers have rather little to say about them. They simply did not fit and their relation with the company ended. From their point of view, there was nothing more they could or should have done in this respect. Although a previous study (Mitan, 2014) shows that youngsters expect the managers and companies to invest much in their development, perhaps also based upon their belief that they deserve to be trusted and valued, the answers given by the people we interviewed underline a simple truth: a company's goal is to make profit and establishing good working relations between people by addressing their needs is important but when an employee expects too much from a manager, a colleague or a company, he or she will undoubtedly be disappointed. There must be an equilibrium between what the employee gives and what he or she takes.

In conclusion, the so-called mind gap between youngsters and mature managers does not seem to be a particular problem in the cases we have given insight to. We assume that this situation is not to be generalized in all the Romanian organizations or companies but as long as managers understand that the human resource is their best asset, they will try to find the best means to meet the needs of their younger colleagues and to help them release their full potential. As such, there does not seem to be a problem with the people who belong to the gen Y employees group, as they seem to perform well and their managers seem to be content with their work, but rather a problem with people who never try to get a job or try and fail to be employed. As the answers presented above show, the perceptions

that managers have of gen Y prospective and actual employees is unlikely to be the real cause of the large numbers of young people who are unemployed.

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