

Which one's the learner?

From boosting retention to bridging the generation gap, reverse mentoring is brimming with potential

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Having started his career in EMCOR UK as an apprentice 30 years ago, Dave Parker has witnessed a huge shift in how first jobbers interact with the 'masters' from whom they're learning their trade.

"For 25 years, nothing much really changed, but I think in the last five we've seen a significant shift in how younger people interact with the older generation," he says. "Before, there was an idea that the young weren't there to tell you anything, but that has changed."

These days, says Parker, the younger cohort of workers at the facilities management company have valuable knowledge to share with their more experienced colleagues. And while the firm has run a mentoring scheme between established employees and apprentices for some time, it now finds that knowledge is moving the other way, too.

And it's not the only one: more and more UK organisations are setting up more formal ways for older workers to learn from younger staff.

At EMCOR, the need for 'reverse mentoring' has partly been created by the increased role technology plays in the company's activities – instructions about new jobs come in via a handheld device, for example, something younger employees tend to feel more comfortable with. "The apprentices see helping with the technology as a reciprocal thing; they're buying kudos with their more experienced peers, who recognise that they can teach them something," says Parker.

But it's not just in the technology realm where reverse mentoring is having a positive impact. "The younger generation is now taught properly about health and safety, whereas in the past this wasn't as much part of the general national mentality, which could have created some bad habits," says Parker. ►



"Younger people's attitude is 'I know this is wrong', and they don't feel afraid to say so."

According to Professor Karl Moore from the Desautels Faculty of Management at McGill University in Canada, millennials' desire for regular feedback has led to a growing interest in reverse mentoring, particularly in an age where four generations (boomers, gen X, gen Y and gen Z) are increasingly working alongside each other. "Millennials get technology in a way older employees don't because it's all they've ever known; they appreciate different working models and are accomplishment-based; they're less focused on hierarchy. My students call me Karl, but I would never have called my professor by his first name," he says.

The biggest stumbling block, however, is older workers' occasional reluctance to be mentored by someone younger than them. Chris Merrick, business development director at Capita Resourcing, says this is a challenge HR needs to tackle: "Senior team members may not accept that their younger contemporaries have valuable knowledge to share, and may not be open to receiving feedback from

someone with less experience. On the other hand, younger staff need to feel confident enough to share their views and may be less willing to participate if they

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EMCOR is one of a growing number of companies embracing reverse mentoring. Simi Gandhi-Whitaker, business development director, is currently sharing her expertise with logistics manager Steven Mullen. "The mentoring scheme has been extremely beneficial to me," says Mullen. "It has taught me to evaluate and approach situations in various ways, especially when confronted with challenging situations." Gandhi-Whitaker adds: "Supporting Steve has been great for me, too. I've learned a great deal about the operational pressures he encounters, and we have found the best strategies to deal with them."

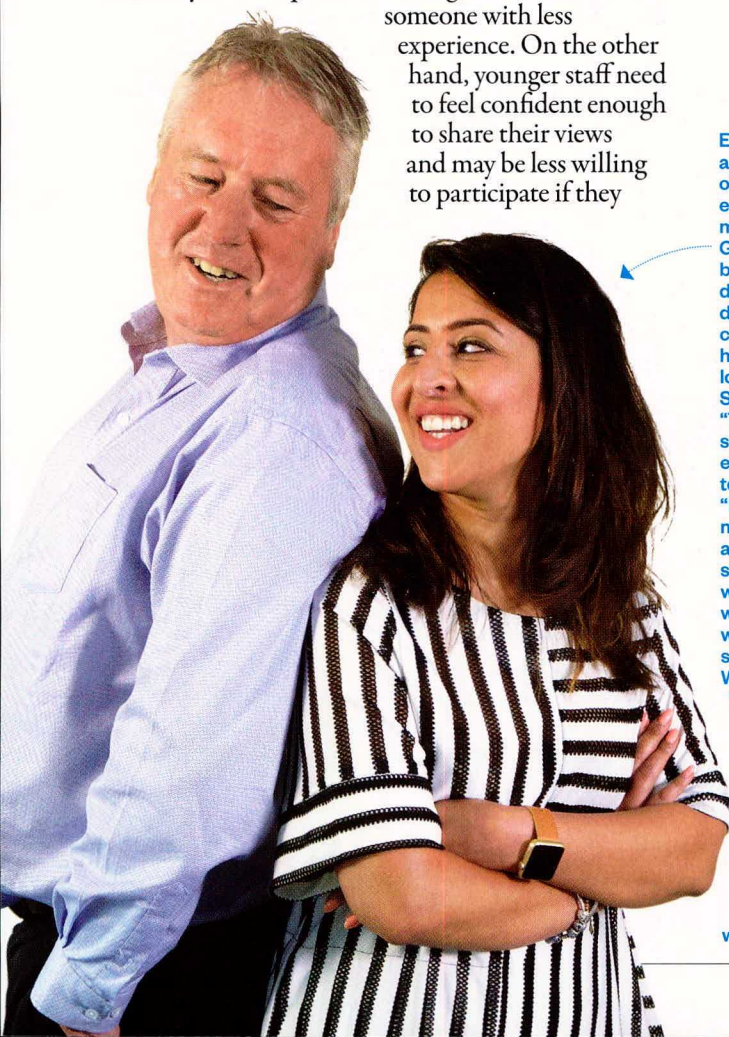
haven't had to give feedback to colleagues before. HR teams need to help employees recognise the benefits they can take away from it."

Partly, this is because, while positioning such mentoring as a 'reverse' of the traditional relationship is a good way of piquing participants' interest and overcoming stereotypes, in an ideal world we would learn naturally from those with the most to offer us, regardless of their age. Technology giant Dell, for example, encourages greater dialogue between all generations, rather than focusing only on mentoring in one direction. Its 'GenNext' programme, launched last year, urges younger employees to give direct feedback on new products and marketing to more established colleagues, but also works reciprocally, with experienced workers sharing their skills and knowledge with graduates.

"The GenNext group isn't just for younger employees; it also includes more experienced team members from different job levels across Dell who support and provide knowledge to graduates," says Tim Loake, co-executive sponsor of the scheme. "The group provides a real opportunity for all members to exchange ideas, and for our organisation to benefit from the unique skills that both graduates and 'old hats' bring."

But while reverse mentoring can help senior employees gain insight into emerging business models or ways of working, arguably its most successful use up to now has been in the transfer of digital knowledge. L'Oréal runs a formal reverse mentoring programme where senior managers are assigned digital mentors to help them "understand trends and tools in the digital world", according to HR learning director Leah Jones. Interns have taught managers how to use Snapchat, while one co-ordinator ran a bite-sized workshop for the HR team on how to use social media. There has been an additional benefit in terms of how engaged and valued the younger cohort feels. "Our digital-savvy millennials who are nominated to be mentors also feel valued, recognised and empowered by being able to share their expertise with a senior leader and the wider business," says Jones.

A recent report into millennials at work by consulting firm PwC came to a similar conclusion. "Companies say a benefit is reduced turnover among younger employees, who gain a valuable glimpse into the world of management via top-level access," says the report. "These programmes also help transfer corporate knowledge to millennials, which will become increasingly important as baby boomers retire in greater numbers." If you're not already doing reverse mentoring, isn't it time you gave it a try? **PM**



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