

in pursuit of up-skilling

The age of “do it yourself” career advancement

BY GENINE WILSON

For many, the old paradigm of long-term employment with one or just a few companies has evolved into a new norm of career paths made up of many jobs and often, freelance consulting work. Today’s workers are re-evaluating their skill sets and technical abilities and seeking out ways to upgrade their expertise. For many, this process of up-skilling is now a near-constant pursuit and often on a do-it-yourself (DIY) basis.

Research conducted by Kelly Services, a global staffing firm, shows us that highly desirable professional and technical workers are at the leading edge of the DIY Career Development paradigm.

They are no longer waiting or relying on employers to design, lead or even invest resources into their training and skill-building. DIY is not just a home-improvement acronym anymore. Now it applies firmly to career advancement as well as personal and employer branding.



This movement is practiced by all generations—those just starting out in their careers to workers old enough to be their grandparents. It also presents new challenges and opportunities for employers who want to attract and retain the best available talent. Companies that want a competitive advantage must create an innovative, collaborative work environment and provide workers with opportunities to showcase their skills while strengthening their employer brand.

Career Building in an Age of Uncertainty

In the same way the Great Depression led people to change their behaviors in ways that lasted a lifetime, the Great Recession and its ensuing “soft” recovery has left many workers with the feeling that they live in an age of uncertainty. According to our research, 51 percent of U.S. workers say they are more concerned about their knowledge and skills becoming obsolete or outdated than they are about a possible layoff.

Interestingly, these concerns about skill obsolescence are greatest at opposite ends of the generational spectrum. In fact, 67 percent of the silent generation in the U.S. is concerned about keeping skills current. This likely reflects the prevalence of free agents among this group, since they have to continually

sell their skills to new clients. This may also reflect concerns regarding age discrimination as well as the need to fight stereotypes that they are not as tech-savvy as younger generations.

U.S. millennials come in second with 54 percent concerned with learning new skills. This reflects not just the uncertain economic times in which they grew up, but also their fascination with technology and complex business models, and their relatively high degree of comfort with change. They are comfortable piecing together income from various sources and want to be able to thrive in any company, while seeking alternatives if necessary. Nearly half of the millennials polled agreed that organizations need to value entrepreneurial mindsets and experience. Progressive organizations will want to focus their attention on this group because they are setting current workplace trends that will likely last for years to come.

Looking Back, Looking Forward

In the old career development paradigm, productive employment was built on a number of things that almost seem quaint to recall. A relatively stable economy supported a paternalistic employer approach and fostered a sense of security and loyalty among employees. This meant that while always mindful of economic cycles, employers

would invest in expanding their permanent workforce whenever market conditions made this feasible.

Employees would typically work together in teams at one physical location, and work environments and schedules were both highly structured. The silent generation was able to place a high value on security and continuity in their careers while enjoying lengthy tenures with one employer, and often one skill set.

As a result, employees were typically loyal to one or just a few employers. Meanwhile employers were able to identify high-potential employees, guide career-development plans and directly provide and/or sponsor training in skills required to keep their company successful and innovative.

The new career development paradigm presents a different picture, one built around potential employability. Today’s dynamic global economy and its accelerated technological change mean employer’s time horizons are shortened, and this can increase employee unease. Volatile market conditions in recent years have made many employers wary of adding to their permanent payrolls and more receptive to the concept of a scalable, variable workforce. Plus, technology now enables work teams to be geographically dispersed, and skilled talent increasingly considers flexibility in work arrangements as a key factor in their employment decisions.

Careers are now developed across multiple employers and, talent is willing to shift employers and/or their status because they want to take the lead in managing their own career and developing skills that enable them to thrive in any company.

Generational Breakdown:

Silent Generation:	Over 70
Baby Boomers:	52 to 70
Generation X:	40 to 51
Millennials:	21 to 39
Generation Z:	20 and younger



...U.S. workers say they are more concerned about their knowledge and skills becoming obsolete or outdated than they are about a possible layoff.”

A New Work Covenant Takes Shape

It is increasingly apparent that the talent marketplace is replacing the tradition of employment with employability. This suggests that companies that want to successfully attract and retain the most desirable talent should focus attention on several key areas:

- **Give employees a place and opportunity to showcase their skills.** This allows them to build a portfolio and increase employability.
- **Study your organization’s talent needs.** This is the best way to build resilient teams in a multi-sourced globalized environment.
- **Be mindful of employer branding.** As workers place more attention on their personal brands, it has become increasingly more important for employers to convey a clear and compelling brand message, thereby attracting the talent with the best fit possible.
- **Create innovative engagement programs beyond retention.** Employers need to offer ways for potential, current and past employees to engage with the company, from training and development opportunities to participating in online communities.

Employees recognize that their career success depends on staying fresh with skills. This is especially true with free-agent workers. Highly engaged, committed workers have always been passionate and driven. But now, along with their contributions comes an increasing knowledge of their own value and a desire to succeed on their own terms.

Development Opportunities Are Key Drivers

According to a 2015 Pew Research study, more than one out of three American workers are millennials, surpassing Generation X as the largest group in the workforce. Given their rising influence on workforce trends, it is important for employers to understand the millennial DIY career development mindset. When choosing one position and employer over another, there are three key drivers. These include opportunities for advancement, training programs and leadership development. Additionally, these workers are seeking an opportunity to work with colleagues who are recognized as knowledgeable and from whom they can learn. And of course, the opportunity to innovate and work on innovative projects and initiatives is highly desirable.

Attracting and retaining talent today requires accepting the new career development paradigm and actively adapting to it. Employers that understand the importance of these key drivers will be best positioned to attract and retain top professional and technical talent.

It is also important for organizations to understand the implications of this career development shift as valuable employees—those proven to have higher loyalty, show greater effort and added value—may be increasingly harder to engage and retain. As organizations seek to bring top talent into their projects, they must recognize the importance of investing in their most valuable assets.

Regardless of your age, up-skilling should be at the top of your to-do list. It is an incredibly important way to build up your personal and professional brand in an age of uncertainty and will help you sell your talent and skills to employers who see the value in them and want to bring you on board. That is a strategy that will reward you throughout your career. ✪



Genine Wilson is the Southern California Territory Vice President for Kelly Services. With nearly 20 years of industry experience, she currently oversees the region’s staffing and business operations.