

## REVERSE THINKING

To reimagine the way knowledge is shared in the workplace and to broaden their perspective, every CEO needs a mentor under 30, writes Jan Owen AM.

**Diversity of perspective** and lived experiences can make for an exceptional mix of innovation, critical thinking and expertise. However, we often see this difference as a barrier day-to-day, manifesting in varied approaches to tasks, communication and perception of job roles. This can often result in workplace tensions, colleagues not seeing eye-to-eye, and ultimately a lack of teamwork and productivity.

Young workers are often described as ignorant, arrogant, overly opinionated and ambitious – a problem to be solved, people who need to learn the ropes and earn their place. With four or five generations currently engaged in our workforce, there can be a tendency to view the most recent entrants with a mix of distrust and cynicism. There are clear cultural and social differences in the way different age groups think and behave. Avoiding or denying this may mean we miss out on the vital knowledge, skills and diversity of thought young people can bring to workplaces in a rapidly changing world.

The Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) *New Work Order* report series shows by 2030 every single job across the economy will be transformed. In this new, dynamic world of work, traditional linear pathways to a vocation are less common and a young person is predicted to have 17 different jobs across five careers in their lifetime. Attracting and retaining appropriate skill sets in this evolving environment has never been more important.

The answer to addressing our skills supply/demand issue is to rethink the way we share knowledge and develop skills within the workplace. Young graduates mostly come with a degree or technical training, but often lack formal experience in a specific role. However, they often have transferable broader skills and capabilities. Along with a “digital stack” of tools, programs and processes, next-gen workers can often spot opportunities for disruption, bringing fresh perspective and a creative mindset. They are excellent communicators and translators, with agility across multiple platforms – deeply interested in meaning and purpose, learning and growing. They expect to have many careers and a non-linear job path, not a ladder, and are mostly excited about this.

### Mentors, not bosses

We can support young people in the transition to a fast moving, multi-generational workplace long before they join our teams. Offering work-integrated learning opportunities through apprenticeships, internships, higher apprenticeships and work placements prepares young people



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for the world of work while still at school or university. And we can break down barriers once they arrive through reverse mentoring programs.

Over the past few years, I have worked in collaboration with Sherry-Rose Bih Watts, one of our young startup social entrepreneurs at FYA. Sherry-Rose said she wanted to be a CEO and asked to shadow me. I agreed on the proviso this was a reverse mentoring relationship – we would mentor each other.

Once or twice a fortnight, we spend an entire day together. Sherry-Rose comes to every meeting and event internally and often co-presents with me externally. We debrief our observations and I've learned an enormous amount through the eyes of this exceptional young African-Australian woman. I've discovered this is a generation which wants, and needs, mentoring and coaches – not bosses.

Having a mentor under 30 is a must for anyone over 45. Young people are our submarines, our early warning system for changing social and cultural norms and expectations. In a world in which business is increasingly focused on mission and impact, young people are our army of intrapreneurs, offering information from the frontline and they are ready and willing to design the future with us.

There are many mentoring programs across the business sector in particular, which are already making strides towards reverse mentoring. The Acorn Network's five-month mentor program is focused on improving industry diversity in aged care as a sector that typically attracts older workers and can find attracting younger ones more difficult. Through a mentoring program that supports connections between senior leaders and young emerging professionals, the network works to build age diversity and break down barriers.

Peer learning, co-coaching and reverse mentoring can add new perspectives, helping today's leaders drive stronger business impact and giving tomorrow's leaders access to the inner workings of an organisation. It also helps bridge the intergenerational gap by demonstrating value across the organisation at every level and age.

Whether an organisation has a big budget for professional development or is a smaller organisation that relies on its team to drive such things, there are many simple ways to get your current and future workers ready for the new work order. <sup>n</sup>