

Generation Z will transform African business

Across Africa, where a tech-savvy young population is emerging as a force to be reckoned with, employers should be welcoming the breath of fresh air they bring to the corporate world, says pharmaceutical company Novartis.



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Generation Z, also called Gen Z or iGen, is the generation following Millennials into the workplace. As true 'digital natives' aged under the age of 25, the Gen Z approach to work, and their priorities and expectations, are markedly different from those of older generations, says Novartis South Africa HR director, Mbulelo Ntusi. "Gen Z is going to drive change in enterprises, but forward thinking companies like Novartis welcome this," says Ntusi.

"We are already welcoming the youngest Millennials and new Gen Z interns, learners and employees into the company, and we find that they bring with them a change in workforce dynamics," says Ntusi.

"This younger generation is characterised by very entrepreneurial thinking, independence and confidence in their abilities. They are goal-oriented and don't want to be micro-managed. They also seek different approaches to leadership – the old hierarchical structures are not the best model for this generation," says Ntusi.

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Leveraging the enthusiasm, innovation and entrepreneurial spirit that Gen Z can bring to the workplace demands fresh approaches to leadership, organisational structure and even company culture. "Novartis is successfully attracting and retaining next generation employees by refreshing our approaches to management and adopting the 'unboss' model of leadership," says Ntusi.

Speaking during his first visit to South Africa recently in his new role as Novartis Global CEO, Vasant (Vas) Narasimhan, M.D., noted that this 'unboss' approach is designed to ensure that the company's culture stays relevant in a changing world.

“At Novartis we have started on a new culture journey – the ‘unboss movement’. This is set to create a platform for dramatic change where we hope to see our organisation shift from a hierarchical and ‘know-it-all’ culture to a learning, empowering and inspiring one. This kind of workplace environment is quite critical for keeping Millennials and Gen Zs engaged and performing at their best.

‘Unboss’ movement

The new breed of employees that organisations are employing are becoming younger, brighter and more tech enabled. This calls for leaders to start leading differently by creating more clarity, being ready to serve and multiply the impact of their organisations.”

He added that as a multinational pharmaceutical company, Novartis realised the opportunities that rest with the young population that Africa has. “We are committed to developing local talent and giving them opportunities to be part of a global network,” said Narasimhan.

Ntusi says Novartis is focused on developing a culture of bold, continuous learning, in an environment with a sense of affiliation.

“We are moving from an internally competitive environment in which one wins at the expense of another, to a more collaborative environment in which we all win. This culture resonates with next generation employees,” says Ntusi.

“In addition, with workplaces now populated by up to four different generations, a new reverse mentoring culture is taking root, which benefits all the generations and the company as a whole. This builds an engaged, collaborative, curious and empowering culture,” says Ntusi.

Ntusi adds that Gen Z is keen to see rapid progression, and Novartis’ well-established skills development and career progression programmes also resonate with young employees. This generation’s willingness to learn is inspiring older employees to step up their mentorship efforts. Because of the younger generation’s focus on flexibility and work-life balance, companies like Novartis are adapting their formerly rigid approaches to work. Instead of managing time, we are focusing more on outputs and outcomes; and we’re looking at more flexible hours and remote work.”

These changes are not proving disruptive, but are instead beneficial for the entire company and older staff are welcoming the changes the next generation brings. “By becoming more agile and diverse, the company gains a competitive advantage,” says Ntusi.