

CAREER UPSHOT

Want to take your work to the next level? Read on to discover four tips depending on your age

WORDS EUGENE YIGA



T

TO SAY THAT 2020 WAS A STRESSFUL YEAR WOULD BE AN UNDERSTATEMENT.

Indeed, during the first week of the hard lockdown, calls to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group more than doubled. Similar trends have been seen around the world, which isn't surprising given how COVID-19 has turned the world upside down.

'With all the financial, emotional, and general stress (and for various psychological factors) people are finding it more difficult to concentrate on tasks,' says Bronwyn Williams, a futurist, economist, and business trends analyst at Flux Trends. 'They feel like they're not performing at their maximum or meeting their productivity targets. They're afraid that their supervisors are going to pick up on that and call them out. They're afraid of losing their jobs.'

How best can we respond all this? Bronwyn suggests four strategies depending on your age.

BE HUMAN

For Generation Z (born from the mid-1990s to mid-2000s), not only has their academic year been disrupted, but many will graduate into a world where the economy is shrinking and no one's hiring. 'They're just getting into the workplace right now and we need to spare a thought for them,' Bronwyn says. 'Because the younger demographic tends to earn less, and have less secure

employment, this adds to stress. They've grown up alongside technology and came of age as the technologies did. So even though this group is geared to work remotely and happy to work independently, their challenge is much bigger than technology.'

The only way to secure a job is to stand out from all the other people competing for the same role.

This is where emphasising your unique 'human' qualities is valuable. The same thing applies to companies. Specifically, as the world becomes more automated,

the human part of the business becomes the only source of profit.

'In classic economics, no one makes any profit in a perfectly competitive market,' she says. 'The "irrationality" is where profits are found. That's why companies automate cost functions, not value functions. Because we live in a world of warm-blooded human beings, building a brand requires understanding that the margin is in the mystery. It comes from delighting your customers.'

Recommended Reading: *So Good They Can't Ignore You* by Cal Newport.

STAY HEALTHY

In Generation Y (the 'millennials', born from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s), many people work as freelancers and contractors, rather than salaried employees. In fact, it's almost becoming the norm, with more than 40% of millennials not employed formally. But as they've progressed from gig work, often working remotely from wherever they want, we've seen a reverse trend where they're now looking for structure. 'That's why we saw the rise of co-working spaces, which gives you the buzz and energy of people all around you but isn't an office and isn't your home,' says Bronwyn. 'And because millennials tend to be a social and collaborative generation, the struggle right now is about mental health: burnout, loneliness, depression, and stress.'

Overwhelmed employees, particularly those trying to juggle family with work, tend to overwork by not taking lunch or other breaks. But it's a vicious cycle: When you're exhausted your productivity declines, so you work more and more to maintain the same productivity, leading to more burnout. 'The problem is a lack of boundaries and the lack of having a third space - that thirty minutes or an hour in the car that allows you to decompress from work as you switch to your home environment,' Bronwyn says. 'And that overlap between your personal life and your work life is challenging to deal with, particularly for young people that have families and are not just working by themselves in an apartment.'

Recommended Reading: *Do Nothing* by Celeste Headlee



learn new skills (such as using Zoom) they thought they'd never need.

'Over the last few years, I've done a lot of talks on the future of work, telling people to get ready for the way things will be,' Bronwyn says. 'Many people in their 50s and 60s would come to me afterwards and say, 'I'm going to be retired by then so I don't have to learn.' Now they are forced to adopt new ways of working to

catch up.'

Fortunately, it's good to know that when change is necessary, people can change fast. Also, using the new systems isn't as much about overcoming complicated technology as it is about having the mental will to start. Just look at social media. While many older people

GET TRAINED

For Generation X (born from the early 1960s to the late 1970s), many older workers are overwhelmed. Part of this is because they've had to invest in new hardware - laptops and microphones - that they might never have had at home. Part of it's also because they've had to

were late adopters, they now use the platforms more than anyone else.

‘For companies, it’s about trust,’ she says. ‘If you’re retraining and re-skilling your employees, you’re taking a risk that they might not stay with you to earn back the return on investment. And if you don’t have relationships with your employees, it becomes scary. That’s why there has to be reciprocity – skin in the game from both sides – when dealing with these changes.’

Recommended Reading: *The New Corner Office* by Laura Vanderkam

ADD VALUE

Human lifespans have increased significantly at the same time that our retirement savings are worth less and don’t stretch as far as they used to. So, with our economic prospects diminished by what’s happened last year and considering that many people were over-indebted even before COVID-19, baby boomers (born from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s) have to get used to working longer, or else going into early retirement with much less money.

‘Networks are only as strong as their nodes,’ Bronwyn says. ‘The more connections there are between different employees and between different levels, the stronger that network is and the better the organisation becomes.’

That’s why it’s so valuable to retain older employees, even as relationships become more linear due to remote work.’

Granted, building a resilient team is easier in smaller organisations than it is for bigger ones – just think of a family business where the owner knows all the employees by name. Indeed, despite COVID-19, Bronwyn has seen smaller companies more open to investing in employees, which has a short-term cost but a long-term payoff. But all companies, regardless of size, can benefit.

‘If you treat people like human beings, you’ll get more of a connection,’ she says. ‘That’s now the real point of

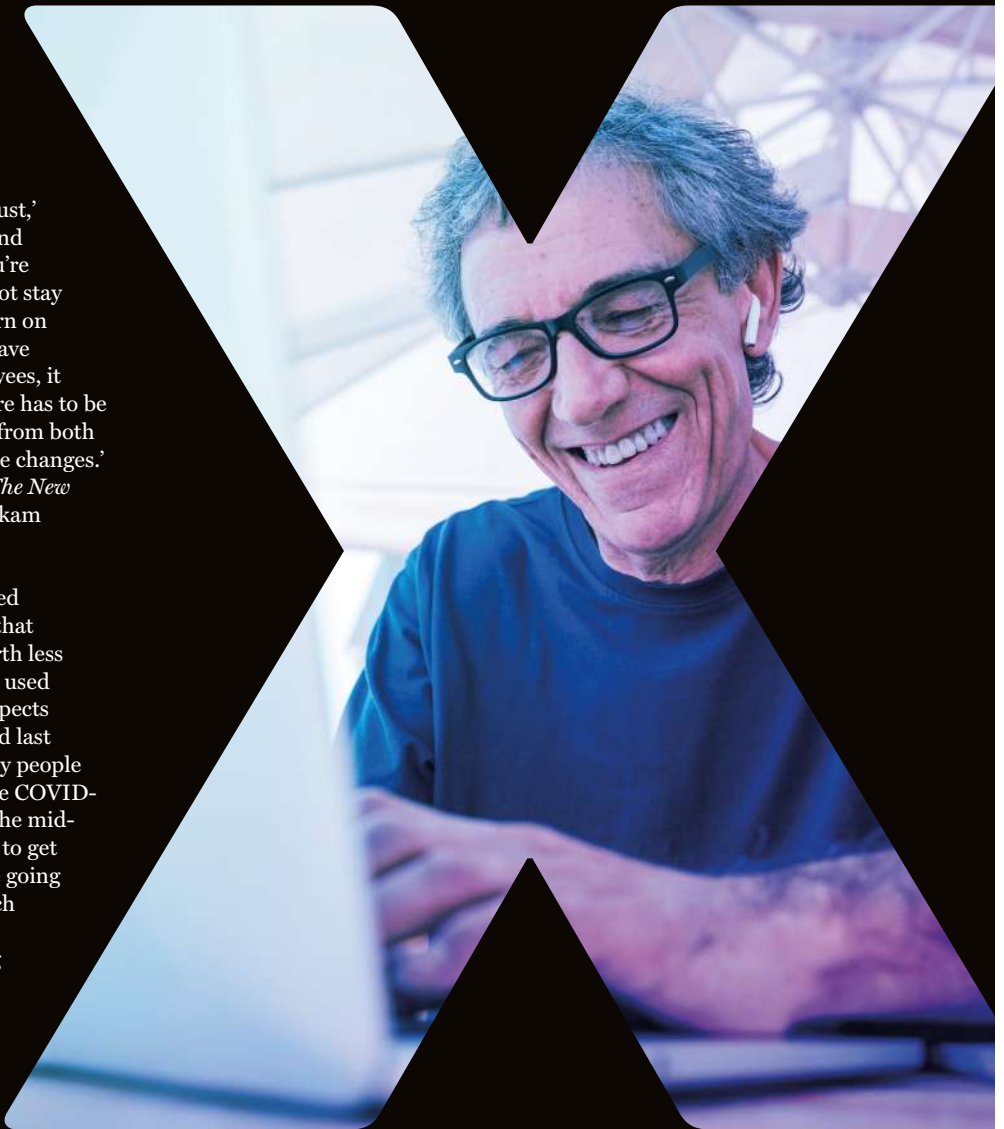
differentiation for companies and the real value they add. That’s also why we should leave the robot tasks for the robots and leave the human tasks for the humans, making the technology work for us and not the other way around.’

Recommended Reading: *Linchpin* by Seth Godin

ALL TOGETHER NOW

Bronwyn predicts many changes in the long-term, both for individual employees and for businesses as a whole. One of the biggest trends, particularly within the COVID-19 crisis framework, is the mental-health impact of remote work. Employers understand that having a

healthy workforce is good for business. It’s why a lot of them are investing in wellness programs and services, with things such as tele-therapy sessions available for employees. ‘Even as lockdown restrictions are easing up, the virus isn’t going anywhere,’ says Bronwyn. ‘And if you’re a responsible company or individual, you’re still going to be practicing a lot of physical-distancing principles (even if you’re not mandated to by law) because you want to stay healthy. So it’s essential to get your mental headspace right, and adjust to a different way of working, particularly given that we’re going to be in this for the long haul.’ **M**



PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY IMAGES