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The New Battlefield in the War for Talent



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he was raised in a household that measures success according to the usual external markers of achievement. So Krystal, the daughter of Jamaican immigrants, dutifully graduated from a major university and went on to get a law degree. Then in her second year of law school she landed

an internship in the litigation division of a corporate law firm, and came to a realization: “If I stay here I won’t recognize myself in five years.” All that had come to matter were the deadlines, not sleeping, not seeing family. As Krystal puts it, the job

required “giving up what keeps you sane.”

There are many reasons companies today may want to pursue the purpose movement more deeply, and one might very well be the benefit of landing young talent like Krystal. She tells me, “I’ve always struggled between aligning with my heart’s work when the ‘should’s and ‘supposed to’s are tied to your career. I’ve gone from one degree to the next. But my calling is rooted in social justice, compassion, and serving the dignity of others.”

So Krystal abandoned the corporate law-firm track. Instead she’s going to work for a university-led outfit to help trauma victims recover, with a focus on restorative justice. The center’s work has become

so valuable that it has attracted the attention of the US Attorney General’s office. It is work that she says “could have a huge impact.”

Even so, such career-turning decisions are never easy and were not for her. “When you want to live your values, some people might think you are crazy,” Krystal says with a laugh. Then she adds, “Our society pushes you not to live our values—but when you have a dream, you have to protect it, like a fragile baby.”

A recent consultant survey found that the COVID pandemic led almost two-thirds of employees in the United States to reflect more deeply on their life purpose, and nearly half said that the pandemic has inspired them to reconsider the kind of work they do. Clearly, the younger generation is a big part of this. In a worldwide survey of more than 6,000 people ages 18–28, the Lindstrom Company found that 80 percent of this younger generation want the purpose of their organization to be aligned with their own sense of meaning. Younger people, perhaps more than any past generation, don’t want to work in an organization that has no fit with their own sense of purpose.

Another Lindstrom survey, of more than 25,000 young adults from countries around the world, revealed that their sense of well-being was more strongly related to meaningful values like strong community connections and making a contribution to others than it was to money or status. The standard perks that companies have been using to attract early-career talent may fall a bit flat these days. Better to add to the mix a clear organizational purpose, one that goes beyond simple profit.

Many in these younger generations feel that the pursuit of profit alone has been a dead end—even as markets, investors, and boards of directors are



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keenly attuned to quarterly earnings as an index of a company’s worth.

Corporate leaders may feel a bind, with their own careers evaluated on the basis of their profits and growth while the key to attracting younger talent seems increasingly to be the firm’s mission. More and more people in their early career would rather not work in an organization that has no purpose greater than quarterly profits. All this suggests that there’s a new battlefield in the war for talent: not just the compensation package a company offers but also the meaning and purpose that organization pursues.

In the new calculus of a job’s worth, Krystal is not alone. ▀

Goleman is the author of the international best seller *Emotional Intelligence*. See keystepmedia.com for his series of primers, “Building Blocks of Emotional Intelligence.”