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The working world is being changed by young people, but being an entrepreneur is still misrepresented

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Although it may have been a decade since the BBC's long-running reality series *The Apprentice* invited true water-cooler discussions, it is still capturing the imaginations of viewers. It returned this month for its fifteenth series, where sixteen candidates are competing to win Lord Sugar's £250,000 investment in their business (up until series seven, the prize had been to win a six-figure salary job at one of Lord Sugar's companies).

This series has been notable for the age of the candidates, with many of them having been too young to remember life before *The Apprentice* started (four of the candidates are aged twenty or under), instead they've grown up in an era where *The Apprentice* and its primetime cousin *Dragons' Den* have popularised the idea of entrepreneurship.

One may think of this as a good thing; a generation inspired into business and self-development. However these programmes have created a distorted picture of the realities of working life and have skewed the younger generation's perception of what starting a business or being an apprentice is really about.

Entertaining Entrepreneurship

Contestants on these programmes are highly unlikely to be the kind of people we'd wish to work with or for. With personality and abrasiveness being qualities more likely to see you selected, than genuine business acumen. Essentially a reality television show, *The Apprentice* sees people with questionable entrepreneurial instincts facing off against another, with both teams struggling to demonstrate even the most basic set of business skills. Often the case that those who seem to who want it the most and are not afraid to say so, ad nauseam, are more likely to succeed than those with quieter, more reflective business practices. This is bad news for a generation who aspire to be their own boss.

As we discussed in last month's issue of *Governance and Compliance*, the idea of self-employment has been glamorised, through the evolution of 'side-hustles' and younger people are being driven further and further into the idea that work should mirror your personal ambitions and interests, often at the expense of stability.

In fact, in a recent investigation conducted by *Entrepreneur First*, over half of respondents aged 18-30 said that they

felt more ambitious than their parents' generation. The UK's young people are not just looking for a get rich quick style of working, they are both ambitious and entrepreneurially minded, with the view that setting up a company of their own is the best way to achieve their ultimate professional goals.

These ambitions may be laudable, but worryingly the same investigation found that three quarters of respondents were unable to name an entrepreneurial role model whose values would inspire them to achieve their professional ambitions.

Lifestyle Choice

Perhaps what we are seeing more than is a desire from young people to forge their own path and create their own working practices. *The Apprentice* misrepresents many things about being an entrepreneur. Teams, not solo heroic figures, are responsible for the biggest entrepreneurial success. Also, the desire to create new companies is more often tied to wanting to maximise impact in the world, not just trying to increase their bank balance.

According to the BBC, the number of self-employed workers has been on the up in the UK since 2001 and they now account for around 15% of the working population. This is particularly relevant to young people, with the number of self-employed workers aged 16 to 24 nearly doubling since 2001.

Young people are not alone in wanting to change working practices to ensure a better work/life balance. Businesses, politicians and think tanks are all looking at ways to revolutionise how people work and many of these proposed changes, may in fact offer more of the freedom young workers seek, as well as the stability full-time employment offers.

Future Working

Some companies have looked to banning out of hour emails, taking inspiration from law passed in France in 2017 which requires companies with more than 50 employees to establish hours when staff should not send or answer emails. And, earlier this year, New York City discussed proposals to become the first city in the US to grant employees the "right to disconnect" after work.

At the time, Rafael L Espinal Jr, who proposed the idea, said: "Technology has really blurred the lines between our work hours and personal time". In the UK, there have been proposals to cut the average working week in the UK to 32 hours within

10 years under a Labour government.

This would reduce it to the equivalent of four days. The shadow chancellor, John McDonnell made the claim at the Labour Party Conference, stating that the cut could be done with "no loss of pay".

"We should work to live, not live to work. As society got richer, we could spend fewer hours at work," Mr McDonnell told Labour's annual conference in Brighton. "But in recent decades progress has stalled, and since the 1980s the link between increasing productivity and expanding free time has been broken. It's time to put that right".

Trade Unions have supported the idea, with TUC stating that artificial intelligence, robotics and automation could provide a £200bn UK economic boost in the next decade, savings from which could be used to reduce working hours. TUC estimate that 1.4m people now work a full seven days a week in the UK. There is a precedent to be found from The Communication and Workers Union, who took on the fight to have the benefits of automation evenly shared – at the Royal Mail.

When the postal service invested in new sorting machines – thus cutting down on the amount of time workers were needed to sort out packages – it wanted the staff to work extended delivery rounds instead. The dispute took two years to resolve.

Young people will shape the future of business and entrepreneurship, but not through emulating candidates from *The Apprentice*. Instead it's events like this month's One Young World's 10th annual summit in London, which welcomes young delegates from more than 190 countries as well as political and humanitarian leaders, including the former UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon, the former president of Ireland Mary Robinson, Sir Richard Branson, Sir John Major and the Canadian prime minister, Justin Trudeau.

"Our young delegates are founders, activists and entrepreneurs in their own right, united by a common goal to resolve some of the world's most pressing challenges – from climate change and violent extremism to sexual violence and poverty," said Kate Robertson, a cofounder of the UK-based not-for-profit organisation.

In a world where the most recognisable climate activist is a 16-year-old girl from Sweden, Robertson said: "At the heart of every global threat is a failure of leadership. This new generation is the most informed, most educated, most connected generation in human history". n