Young Workers Don’t Want to Become Managers — and This Study Uncovers the Reason Why.

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As a young computer developer, I never had any aspirations of being a manager, let alone a CEO.

When I started my career some 30 years ago, everybody in my field seemed to be following the so-called IBM model of climbing the corporate ladder — starting at the entry level for a few years and then hopping from rung to rung into more senior managerial roles. It wasn’t for me.

Luckily for me, I worked for a progressive company that understood the need to create dual career paths. You could remain an individual contributor, sometimes leading technical projects, or you could be a manager. I chose the technical track, rising through my field until there was nowhere left to go but the C-suite. Now that I’m here, I see a huge problem.

The average person has no interest in being a manager anymore.

My company recently ran a survey of 1,000 full-time employees across the U.S. who are not already in a managerial position. A meager 38% said they were interested in becoming a people manager at their current company. This problem crosses industries and borders. We’re seeing clients in all lines of work struggling to fill frontline management positions.

It’s becoming clear that companies have to adapt to fill these

gaping voids, and the stakes couldn't be higher. Picture a Jenga tower – there are only so many blocks you can remove from the middle before the top comes crashing down.

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Why management roles have grown less attractive

There was a time when the title manager meant prestige, respect, maybe even admiration – a chance to lead, a pathway to the top. But that dynamic has been shifting for decades and can now feel out-of-touch and out-of-date.

This management backlash has roots in several places. For one, trust in leadership has eroded sharply. Only 21% of workers strongly agree that they trust the leadership in their company, and the number has been on the decline since the pandemic.

At the same time, the "individual contributor" has enjoyed increasing status in many circles, especially in the tech community. A talented developer, for instance, can rise through the ranks of a company without managing people. Ultimately, their pay and perks may end up being comparable with senior people leaders, without ever having to wrestle with the challenges that go along with management.

Meanwhile, the pressures on managers are only growing. Familiar challenges with delivering results and bottom-line value have been augmented in recent decades with mounting HR responsibilities. For many, the stress and time commitment of management simply outweigh any added benefits.

Indeed, of all the insights gleaned from this survey, one stood out to me more than any other – people see managerial responsibilities as a non-starter for work-life balance. Among

those we surveyed, 40% said their biggest worry with becoming a manager was increased stress, pressure and hours. When we asked people to identify their top ambition, 67% said spending more time with their friends and families and 64% said being more physically and mentally. The lowest priorities were becoming a C-suite executive (4%) and becoming a people manager (9%).

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How to fill the ‘missing middle’

This management gap couldn’t come at a worse time. As companies struggle with disruptions from AI, increasing automation and a tight labor market, clear leadership is needed more than ever, but it’s getting hard to find.

So how can companies fill the “missing middle” — and make management aspirational again?

One important step is to redefine the meaning of manager. Partly, this is about reconceptualizing the role. The tech industry, for instance, has popularized “player-coaches:” employees who continue to contribute as individuals, while also leading small teams of trusted colleagues. While this balance can be challenging to strike, the upside is sustained engagement with your field and growth of new management skills.

At the same time, companies are finding new ways to valorize management. When McKinsey asked middle managers what they wanted more of, the obvious answer was bonuses. In a competitive market, many companies are dishing out signing bonuses to attract talent into the pipeline. According to a 2021 survey, 43% of hiring managers were offering more paid time off and 40% were offering better job titles to win the war for talent. It’s not all about perks, however. Middle

managers also said they wanted to be rewarded with increased autonomy and more responsibility.

An equally critical step is to help managers handle those increased responsibilities with better technology – enabling them to extend spans of control while diminishing toil and grunt work. Take the challenge of handing out raises. Traditionally, this process required a manager to manually evaluate every employee and come up with a number and a rationale for each one. But new tools are taking the guesswork and paperwork out of the equation. We use a smart compensation tool to evaluate performance metrics and create a clear picture of what a person is paid relative to their peers, and relative to industry standards. This not only removes risk of bias but also cuts down on time. There are similar tools for goal-setting and skills-mapping, lessening the burden of regular performance reviews while making them more meaningful.

Related: Here's How Managers Can Role Model A Good Work-Life Balance For Their Teams

Behind all these efforts lie advances in collecting and sharing people data. The better we can arm frontline managers with insights about their teams, the faster they can make the right decisions.

In a world with fewer managers, these steps mean companies can increase spans of control while maintaining productivity, reducing stress and saving people time. In the end, it's not just for retaining current managers, but recruiting new ones. Consider this: Deloitte found 73% of managers said they should be a model of well-being for their employees, but only 35% of employees could see that in their manager. Until we give them the time and resources to do their jobs effectively and happily, people will continue to have reservations about moving up in the ranks. The Jenga tower will continue to sway – if not collapse.

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