The Future is Fernanda
By Amy Ward

Fernanda Vasquez wants my job, and I’m good with that.

I met Fernanda Vasquez recently at Loara High School in Anaheim, California, where we have a fully functioning Union Bank branch that was run by 12 students of the class of 2018. The entire group, like Fernanda, has big aspirations for their careers and even greater plans to change the world. Fernanda wasn’t one of the student bankers, but she was in their shoes not too long ago.
After graduating in 2014 from Lincoln High School in East Los Angeles, where she was part of our student-run branch program, Fernanda attended UC Irvine and earned her bachelor’s degree in business economics in three years—impressive by any standard. She was such a standout at Lincoln, and at UCI, that we hired her right out of college to be the branch service officer at Loara. Since then, she’s moved from proud banker to a new role in our Project Management Academy program on the IT side of the bank. In two years, Fernanda will be a project manager.

As incredible as her journey has been, there are dozens of young people who are where Fernanda was just a few years ago—young women and men working in our student branch- es, which are active on four high school campuses in California in addition to Loara: Crenshaw and Lincoln in Los Angeles, McLane in Fresno, and Mountain View in El Monte.

These students aren’t just collecting units and skimming the basics of finance. In fact, during my tour of Loara High School, I was struck by their drive, ambition, and altruism. Jessica, Luis, and their classmates told me they were eagerly awaiting acceptance letters from Cal State Fullerton, Cal Poly Pomona, Stanford, and Johns Hopkins. Sarai, Edgar, and their peers said they were interested in careers in aerospace engineering, business, and medicine. Muniro and Cinthia had already started a nonprofit organization that collects books and charitable contributions for communities in Africa.

Rafael, Rami, Cynthia, and Daniel had spent the previous semester visiting Loara’s classrooms to teach their peers financial skills that will enable them to make smarter decisions for the rest of their lives. Aaron and Mariam had a passion for helping freshmen open savings accounts for the first time, because they want to save for college.

We are fortunate to have a group of highly motivated young professionals representing our bank who are confident, often multilingual, entrepre- neurial, financially savvy, and fully employable upon graduation at any bank branch in the country. In fact, we’ve hired dozens of former students from the more than 150 who have worked in our high school branches since the program’s inception in 2010.

My visit to Loara High School gave me renewed hope for the people side of banking.
particularly for the generation that’s about to enter the workforce. Workforce trends for financial services suggest a progressively reduced need for human capital, giving way to robotics, artificial intelligence, and mobile and other technology-enabled devices. Familiar notions of professional roles, career education, and workplace dynamics will shift dramatically in the financial institution of the future.

These trends create a seemingly uncertain career trajectory for our student bankers. But can technology ever truly replace emerging talent with diverse perspectives, innovative ideas, digital competence, and enhanced emotional intelligence?

I’d say, “Certainly not.”

A Global Banking Outlook report by Ernst & Young, entitled Transforming Talent: The Banker of the Future validates my viewpoint: “By 2025, millennials will make up 72% of the global workforce; their aspirations and attitudes will shape the workplaces of the future. If banks are to prosper, they must retain leading talent and encourage a culture of ‘intrapreneurism’ by nurturing diversity of thought. A stronger, better banking world won’t be made up of the best individuals, but the best combination of diverse individuals.”

Aligned with these findings, as my HR team develops new strategies to equip the workforce of our future, we understand that we must engage the next generation of talent by appealing to their need for purpose, meaning, and impact in their work, which can only be achieved through inclusion of their unique voices and experiences.

The good news is that we have a ready pipeline of incredibly diverse thought leaders in the making through our real-life student-led branch at Loara, where 12 teenage bankers are serving other teenagers, faculty, and staff (customers) under the supervision of an adult branch manager and an adult branch service manager. I see the future in these young bankers, as well as in Fernanda, who is already starting to carve out a career path.

As I was leaving Loara, Fernanda could barely contain her enthusiasm about her new role, even while exclaiming that she had just gotten married about an hour before we met! I was astonished to learn that she had taken time away from her wedding day to be present for my visit to the branch, but it only serves to reinforce the dedication of the next generation to achieving their professional goals. I fully expected Fernanda to tell me that she wanted to be a lifelong banker. To my delight, she said that her
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Fernanda’s dream is to be the head of HR someday. Fernanda has had a few opportunities to see how HR works and she’s drawn to it. Her passion for the profession is authentic and frankly reinvigorating for me. If we’ve helped Fernanda discover that passion through our high school branch program, then we’ve succeeded by every measure. Whether she goes into HR, project management, or banking, I’m glad she’ll be on our team.

A young person inspired has an unimaginable ripple effect. The formula we’ve fostered is simple and elegant: invest in the next generation by teaching them the principles of responsible banking; expose them to as much real-world experience as possible; be inclusive; and encourage all dimensions of diversity. If they are ultimately attracted to banking, we will be fortunate to have them in our profession. If they become physicians, engineers, teachers, or business owners, we can take pride in knowing that we helped them cultivate the values and skills critical for success in any workplace of the future—values like integrity, collaboration, and stewardship; and skills like communication and continuous improvement. Most important is something they have within them: a commitment to service on behalf of others.

We have only to invest in our growing young workforce and empower it to unleash its potential.

Fernanda, I hope to see the day when you’re the chief human resources officer for one of the largest banks in the world. The future is yours! PDJ

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