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Managing the Multigenerational Workforce

Meeting the unique needs of the Traditionalists, Generation Xers, and Millennials

Managing multigenerational workforces is an art in itself: an art of patience, communication and acceptance of everyone's strengths and weaknesses. How can you, the Human Resources Manager meet the needs of these seemingly disparate groups while maintaining a cohesive work environment?

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5/27/2008

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As the baby boomers approach retirement age, companies must begin to plan ahead by investing in leadership development and succession planning. The numbers are truly staggering; according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics 25 million employees plan to leave the workforce by 2010. Of these, 22 million will be at least 45 years of age and will be exiting due to retirement; creating a significant need for younger workers to fill the vacated jobs. Unfortunately, a recent report by the Center on Aging and Work indicates more than 25 percent of U.S. businesses have done little to plan for the effects of this aging workforce. Additionally, respondents acknowledged that they are facing challenges when it comes to replacing the retiring workforce.

While there are approximately 75 million **Traditionalists**, 76 million **Baby Boomers**, and 44 million **Generation X** members, **Generation Y** is closer to 80 million, and we have not even begun to reach critical mass in the workforce yet. Therefore, it is essential that managers prepare for the inevitable clash between the multi-generations as they mix in the workplace.

Managing multigenerational workforces is an art in itself: an art of patience, communication and acceptance of everyone's strengths and weaknesses. The **Generation Y** workers want to make a quick impact, whereas the **Generation X** employees need to believe in the mission. The **Baby Boomers** and Traditionalist workers don't like the ambivalence and simply play by the rules. Each generational group carries unique attributes, and today's Human Resources manager needs real solutions and techniques to effectively blend the various workforce groups while maintaining a cohesive work environment.

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DEFINING THE WORKFORCE

The Traditionalists

(...born between 1922 and 1945)

The **Traditionalists** are defined as highly dedicated, disciplined, moderate, and stable. They have built their success on hard work, discipline and postponement of material rewards. Additionally, they respect hierarchy and consider modern technology as typed memos and flip charts. “Giving back” and contributing to the collective good is an emblem of this generation. At work, members of this generation are looking for fair play—and when they find it they are loyal to the company and work within the system. For most Traditionalists, their word is their bond and they expect others to behave responsibly and to honor commitments, whether or not they’re the bosses.

Contrary to the popular belief that they have reached a career plateau, many Traditionalists are still very interested in their individual futures and in trying new things at work. They want to know that their employers value their work and that they are making a financial contribution. Thus, to support and retain this generation, a Human Resources Manager must verbally and publicly acknowledge their experience, provide proactive technology support services if they aren’t techno-savvy and let them know how their contributions drive profitability and impact the bottom line.

The Baby Boomers

(...born between 1946 and 1964)

The **Baby Boomers** have a “whatever it takes” mentality, are very results oriented and believe companies should have a hierarchical style of management. They do not expect results and respect immediately, rather they are firmly rooted in the belief that one must work their way up and are willing to work long/hard hours to gain such respect.

Researchers found that employers would be effective at retaining retirement-age workers if they offered more flexible work options. "Most older workers who say that they want to extend the number of years they remain in the labor force also say that the typical 8-hour day/5-day week doesn't work for them," said Marcie Pitt-Catsoupes, co-director of the Center on Aging and Work. "Employers who fail to consider flexible work options may be missing important opportunities to enhance both their business performance and their employees' engagement."

Generation X

(...born between 1965 and 1980)

Generation X place family and community above work requirements. They are independent, resourceful and simply “work to live.” To retain this talent pool, make their work fulfilling and they will surely move mountains. However, if they fail to believe in the mission, they will disengage and become unproductive.

When managing Generation X employees, ensure they can be reengaged through fresh assignments, mentoring and knowledge-sharing roles. Even career changes within the company can re-ignite a Gen-Xer’s enthusiasm. Compensation and benefit policies should be examined that these workers are not penalized financially because the organization needs them to stay at a certain level. Structure lateral moves as opportunities for greater experience, not as “less than” a promotion and celebrate as such. These workers, now in their 30s and 40s, if properly engaged, can provide an essential knowledge bridge between the more experienced, departing employees and the next generation set to succeed them.

Generation Y, or Millennials

(...born between 1981 and 2000)

Generation Y or Millennials don’t believe in hierarchy or rigid structures. They are strong multi-taskers and are very participative in their interactive style. They are also much less loyal to their respective organizations and are seeking responsibility and expect to have input right away. This generation brings together the “can do” work ethic of the Traditionalists, the teamwork approach of the Baby Boomers, and even greater technical savvy than that of the Generation Xers.

To attract and retain this talent pool, be clear about your goals and expectations, communicate frequently, provide supervision and structure, and establish mentoring programs. It is essential to welcome their optimism and nurture their ambition. They want to be happy at work and are seeking organizations that are friendly in nature. Younger workers aren’t afraid to make decisions, and if you can create a strong social fabric at work, you can leverage their network-centric attitudes.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Each generation comes with its own set of values, needs, attitudes and different expectations on communication styles and job requirements. Companies and managers should follow these simple rules – suggested by the National Federation of Independent Business – to produce a strong marriage between the entering and exiting workforce:



✚ Work with the communication styles of each generation.

The most pronounced difference among generations is the style of communication. Generation Y prefers to communicate via the latest technology such as texting or blogging. They are highly interactive and group-oriented, much like their social preference. Generation X is (generally speaking) familiar with recent technology. They feel comfortable using tools such as video conferencing, e-mail and text messaging. Baby Boomers and the Traditionalists differ greatly from their younger counterparts. These more experienced workers still prefer face-to-face meetings and telephone conversations.

Differing inter-generational communication styles can clash when diverse workers must collaborate on a project. As a manager, try not to favor one style over another. Instead, work to encourage the generations to connect using both electronic and face-to-face communication.

✚ Find out what motivates each generation.

Each generation views the workplace differently. Bonuses and recognition may motivate Baby Boomers, but Generation X and Generation Y might prefer to work toward the privilege of working from home or having a flexible schedule. It is imperative that managers understand that while it is important to consider a person's generation when figuring out his or her motivation for performing in the workplace, the best bet is to ask each worker.

Motivation isn't homogenous within each generational group. For example, a Generation Y worker might want to take a course to help him or her climb the career ladder while a Baby Boomer might be more interested in "downshifting" his career to spend more time with family. While it is important to understand the differences in the generations, the key is to talk to your employees, rather than make assumptions about what they want based on their age.

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✚ Bridge the generation gap.

As managers of a multi-generational workforce, our ultimate goal is to adapt our leadership style to the differences in each generation. We can build bridges by recognizing the differences and openly talking about them. Remember, each generation offers benefits to a workplace, which a manager needs to encourage and nurture. By offering mentoring roles for middle-aged and older workers, we give



them an incentive to model productivity and also ensure that their knowledge is passed on to the younger workers.

Age differences can create an insurmountable challenge if they take a company by surprise. As with most Human Resources challenges, communication and preparation are the best weapons to avoid a workforce disaster. By embracing and encouraging this workforce diversity, a manager can turn a challenging mix of age and philosophy into an organizational strength and an investment in the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After graduating from Valparaiso University with a degree in Human Resources Management and Communication, Mimi worked for a large restaurant holding company in South Bend, IN where she oversaw the HR functions of approximately 8,000 employees. Mimi then completed her M.B.A. from Loyola University. She subsequently managed the HR function for a non-profit corporation in Chicago. In addition, she served on the financial committee for the United Way and is SPHR certified. Mimi joined Lakeshore in 2006 and specializes in administrative and human resources positions in non-profit corporations and associations.

ABOUT LAKESHORE

Since 1995, Lakeshore has focused on providing accounting and administrative support personnel delivered through temporary help, as well as project, contract to hire and direct hire placements. They annually provide employment to thousands of employees in five major U.S. metropolitan areas, offering specialized staffing solutions to small and medium sized growing organizations. With an absolute commitment to value, they deliver consistent quality people, flexibility and responsiveness, and strong relationships through an entrepreneurial localized approach. View more information on employer staffing solutions. (<http://www.lakeshorestaffing.com>).

