

GENERATIONAL DIVERSITY

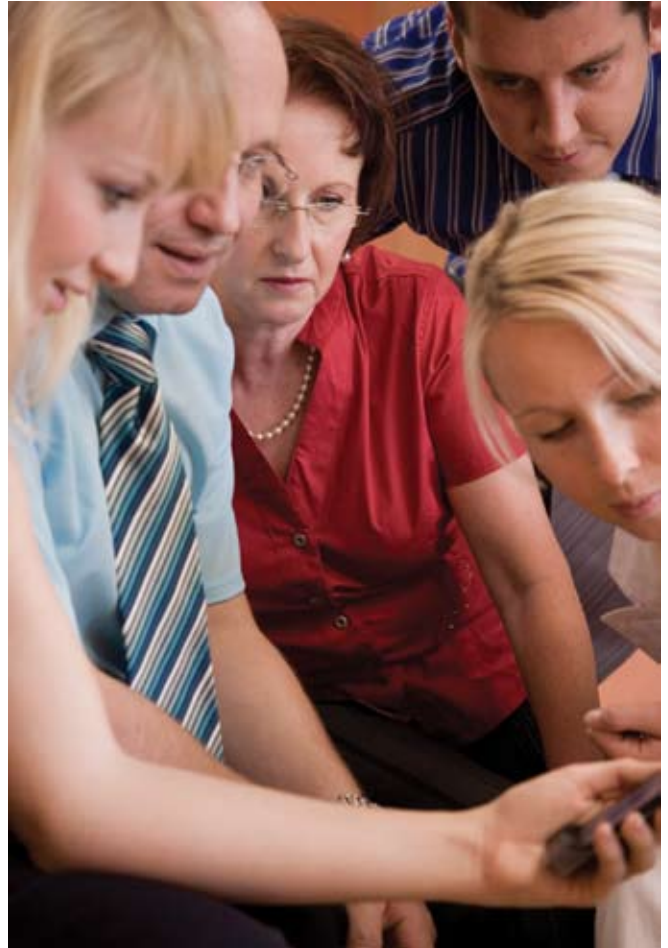
Understanding generational influences on the workplace and marketplace

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Diversity in the workplace continues to be a “hot” topic as the global business arena accelerates at a record pace. Great strides have been made on issues regarding gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation in the workplace. Creeping up the scale of work related diversities is the issue of generation blending, recently coined as the “The Silent Diversity.” Discussion of one’s age is generally an avoidable topic in the work arena. This has probably led to the sluggish development of the skills necessary to deal with the different work habits and management styles that are prevalent in today’s offices. The choices are to ignore it and suffer the expense of turnover or employee static or to acknowledge and understand the driving force associated at each level and incorporate it into our team building skills. A recent ABC news segment on Generational Diversity stated that “Age is the new frontier; generational diversity is something that all employees and employers must pay attention to.”

We as sophisticated managers realize that it is really not the “age” of a person that matters, as much as the ability to recognize the work habits of each individual and have the know-how and foresight to blend experience and talent into a cohesive work environment. Not really that different than what is happening in the music industry, where we all find ourselves either singing along to a remix of a song that our parents sang to us or singing along with music our children are currently listening too. Same song, but an arrangement update to incorporate modern technology and talent.

It has been reported that for the first time in history, there are four generations co-existing in today’s workplace. Although the span of years and the exact numbers attributed to each generation differ slightly from source to source, the statistics are fairly consistent. The Traditionalists, born before 1945, represent 32 million current workers. The Baby Boomers, born 1946–1964, are 76 million strong in the workplace. The Gen X, born 1965–1978 are filling 45 million jobs. Last but not the least, are the Millennials, whose first wave of workers are sometimes referred



to as Gen Y-ers. You will also see them referred to as Nexters or Echo Boomers. They are 78 million strong in the workforce.

In researching this article we found that there was an abundance of information on each generation. Here we have tried to select the most consistent general description and driving forces of each generation’s traits and characteristics.

Traditionalists don’t create waves. They are very loyal respectful employees. For them it’s duty before pleasure. Will usually not challenge or change a system that is working. They are generally as concerned and conservative with the company’s money as they are of their own. Technology is a new frontier to most of them and they have embraced technology advances, but prefer to relate more on physical social skills for communication. On a supervisory level they need to stop and think it through before they challenge new ideas.

Baby Boomers generally live to work and will most likely work after traditional retirement. They take their careers seriously, are an articulate and communicative generation who has fully embraced technology. They are also referred to as the “sandwich generation” referring to their obligations related to their children and their parents. Boomers tend to work up the career ladder and generally are not job hoppers. Tendency to micro manage when frustrated. Their supervisory challenges are to focus on uniting not dividing differences.

Gen X is a generation, who work to live, who want versatility and are skeptical and cynical. Many are in mid-senior management roles; are supervising generations older and younger than themselves and are interacting with board members who are primarily Traditionalists. They are technologically savvy and change jobs more frequently than the generation before them. Their supervisory challenges are to recognize the different generational philosophies and to manage it by being more open and developmental.

Millennials truly believe that there will always be brighter opportunities elsewhere and, therefore, they are not looking for or motivated by a promise of job security. Each job is viewed as a short to long-term contract that will end and they will move on. They are looking to be valued, challenged, recognized and rewarded often. They also question everything; are family oriented; demand clear and consistent expectations; live for the moment and earn money for immediate consumption. This generation can type their way through any situation. Supervising this pampered generation is a challenge.

Generational Difference

A generational issue that is also having an impact on the newer workforce is that of “entitlement.” HR professionals now find themselves fielding phone calls and visits from parents questioning salary increases and promotions. Twenty years ago, this was unheard of. “Why didn’t my son get the supervisory role he was promised” or, “Why didn’t my daughter get the top raise in the department” are examples of parental verbal beefs. When parents are asked why they are calling about their children, a common response is, “Because I have done it throughout their lives.”

These generational differences are layered onto other diversity dimensions such as culture, race, religion, economics and communication styles and abilities. All of these differences create challenges to peers, supervisors and teams in a work environment that is increasingly more competitive and requires greater collaboration and cooperation.

When talking about groups of employees, whether they have been bunched together by their generation or another di-

mension, it is important to remember that this is only one piece of the puzzle. Times change and we are all affected by economic conditions, the political landscape, and now more than ever, technology. Therefore, we can start off with a general understanding on how a particular generation (or any other diversity group) thinks, responds to supervision, their communication styles, their need for feedback and the type and frequency of interaction with their peers. We all look at things through our personal generational lenses and make assumptions based on that view. Having greater insight into these important workplace influencers helps us to recognize subtleties in behavior and hidden messages, to which we may not previously have been alert.

With that said, we need to be cautious about making assumptions with just this understanding. Melanie Holmes, Manpower’s vice president of corporate affairs told ABC News that “it’s dangerous to generalize about a generation of workers. There is no right or wrong generation, no good or bad generation. If workers are really, really good, then age makes no difference. If they are not good, then others may attribute that to their younger age.”

As leaders, it is incumbent on us to get to know our employees as people. We need to explore with each individual: what motivates them; what they expect from leadership; how they like to give and receive feedback and how often; and their short-, mid- and long-term career objectives and personal goals. Other insights to be gained are: Who are the key influencers in their lives? Are they interested in an international assignment or a chance to work in another property in the US?

Employees are our most valuable asset and the war for talent has begun, creating a shortage of workers in specific industries. It is predicted that by the end of the decade, the gap between available jobs and qualified workers to fill these jobs will be three million across all industries. Another staggering reality is that Millennials will have seven jobs by the time they reach their early thirties. We may not be able to change the talent shortage, but we can affect the turnover dynamic by understanding what successful organizations are able to accomplish.

TIPS FOR RETENTION

All Employees

- Satisfy the need to feel a sense of worth
- Satisfy the need to feel competent
- Satisfy the need for trust
- Satisfy the need to have hope

Younger Workers

- Ask for their opinions
- Give them some space
- Let them see your face (feedback)
- Focus on short-term incentives

Gen X

- Allow flexibility in scheduling
- Create a meaningful mentoring program
- Provide opportunities to learn new skills on the job
- Have one-on-one meetings frequently to keep the lines of communication open

Baby Boomers

- Create incentives for them to stay beyond retirement
- Provide career developmental opportunities, such as mentoring, so that critical skills can be transferred to the younger generations
- Give them flexible work arrangements to deal with the “sandwich generation” issues
- Encourage them to create balance so they don’t burn out

Golden Workers

- Communicate in person whenever possible
- Cater to their families (let them work part time)
- Don’t shout at them

Best in class organizations have shifted the paradigm of “younger is better.” They recognize that although nearly half the workforce will be eligible to retire in the next 10 years; there are a majority of them who can’t afford to retire. These employees may be looking for flexible work options or training and transfers to a new department where they can continue to develop their skills.

Successful organizations have figured out the recipe and techniques to attract, retain, communicate and motivate these diverse age employees, from 20 to 80. They focus in uniting, not dividing, based on diversity of their workforce. They continually attract the best and the brightest. They know who they are as an organization and are able to articulate that in all of their employment branding. They know their target employee market in the same way other organizations know their product or service market. They are able to corral the knowledge, skills and abilities and develop cohesive teams, without regard to diversity dimensions.

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work options or training and transfers to a new department where they can continue to develop their skills. Alternatively, many of these two older generations are retiring temporarily, and then rejoining the same or different organization, in the same or different role. The better organizations are more nimble in meeting both the individual’s and the organization’s needs. They are able to keep employees engaged; have the ability to move them around within the organization to enhance their skill set; assist them in adding meaningful experiences; and their retention numbers prove it.

In summary, exploring the many diversity dimensions of our employees, including the generation differences, getting to know them as individuals rather than attaching a label, and implementing progressive and flexible management practices, gives us the ability to mentor, develop and grow our employees and the leaders of tomorrow. ■

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