

Generation GAP

BY PATTI FRALIX

Getting Boomers, Xers and Yers to work together is today's biggest managerial challenge. Here's how to motivate a multigenerational work force.

If your company is like most today, you're struggling with the challenges of managing a work force that includes more diverse generations than ever before. Different perspectives and goals among employees are further complicated because of the age differences between managers and employees. As a business owner, you can't assume that employees of varying ages will understand each other or have the same perspectives and goals. In order to be successful, managers need to understand and value the differences, perspectives and goals of each generation.

Each generation has always complained about those in younger age groups. So the fact that there are differences in the generations is nothing new. What is new today is the magnitude of the differences. It is time to understand and value this diversity so that we can benefit from it. Today's workplace requires successfully managing generations—and failing to do so can harm your business.



There are predominantly three generations coexisting in today's workplace:

- Baby Boomers**—born between 1946-1964
- Generation X**—born between 1965-1976
- Generation Y** (also referred to as Millennials or Echo Boomers)—born between 1977 and the present

The differences between the generations create many challenges in the workplace. These challenges can be negative or positive. It is the manager's job to make sure that these challenges are turned into positives. Here are some of the most common differences between the generations and ways to make sure that each group's talents are recognized, accepted and maximized.

Different Work Attitudes

One of the most common complaints Boomers are heard to make about Gen Xers and Gen Yers is that "they don't have the same work ethic!" Well, they don't, that is true. This does not mean they are not hardworking. What it does mean is that they place a different value and priority on work. While many Boomers have a love/hate relationship with work, Boomers consider work an end in and of itself. Not so for Gen Xers and Gen Yers. They work to be able to fulfill other, more important priorities. Although Gen Xers and Gen Yers are motivated by different things, both age groups need the following:

- Frequent communication, including being told the "why," not just the "what" of projects and priorities.

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- To be included, and not just in what affects them most directly.
- To have fun at work, with a capital "F!"

To motivate Gen Xers:

Make sure you provide the flexibility needed for them to manage their other priorities, such as dependent children, aging parents, and even educational endeavors. This flexibility can be as simple as providing schedule changes to accommodate these needs. Understand that these are needs, not wants.

Provide many opportunities for collaboration and teamwork. This is the generation that "fuels their fire" through teamwork.

Provide recognition in ways that connect with what they value the most. Some value handwritten thank-you notes for a job well done, while others are motivated by a tangible gift, such as flowers or gift certificates.

To motivate Gen Yers:

Provide Gen Yers flexibility in when and where work is done. Gen Yers resist what they see as rigid workday starting

times. They do not understand why coming to work 15 to 30 minutes late is viewed by Boomers as irresponsible behavior. If you can provide technology that allows them to work at home one or two days a week, all the better!

Gen Yers are interested in change and challenge. They will leave a higher-paying good job for the opportunity to experience something new. They do not see their careers as needing to be linear, and they are right. Remember, these are workers who will have at least five different careers, not just jobs, over their life span. Their tenure in a particular job is often no more than two to three years.

Do not interpret their rebellious nature as negative. Let them vent, do not take it personally, and by all means, avoid "writing them up" for it. This is the generation that will challenge and change much of what needs to change in today's workplace.

To motivate Boomers:

Boomers are typically motivated by position, power and prestige. Boomers are often traditionalists, and perks of the position matter. They want titles and authority commensurate with responsibility.

Allow Boomers to participate in associations and conventions that keep them professionally connected to their peers. Boomers are motivated by working together on professional projects in affil-

iation with others like them.

Compensation that is more long term, such as profit sharing and health care benefits including long-term care.

Different Loyalties

Boomers have always been seen as loyal to their companies. They feel a sense of belonging and dedication based on their history. This is not so for the Gen Xers and Gen Yers. They are more focused on the present and future. They do not see a problem in going elsewhere when another, better opportunity comes along. This is often seen as disloyal to their current company, but this isn't necessarily true. Xers and Yers can be very committed to their work, although not to a particular job. They will do what is required—not because of a sense of belonging based on tenure or what the company has provided in the past, but because they find meaning in the work. They need to feel

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that they are making a difference.

How can you motivate a work force whose loyalty lies mostly within? The answer is simple, although the solutions are not always easy to provide. To motivate Gen X and Gen Y, directly connect the job to their interests, and make sure that they find meaning and fun (yes, fun!) in their work.

Providing fun in the workplace does not mean goofing off or wasting time. Examples include:

Provide regular work group outings, such as sports, picnics and concerts. Be

sure that the social outings relate to the culture and interests of the coworkers. Make them optional; not all will be interested.

Celebrate successes, both work-related and individual. Throw a late afternoon party at a favorite watering hole when an important project is completed, or throw a party for no reason at all occasionally. Be more creative than just a monthly birthday celebration. When someone in the group has an important moment, such as school graduation, new baby or new house, celebrate with them. Vary the celebrations, so surprises can accentuate the fun. Again, make these optional, so that those who do not want or need these types of activities are not made to feel they are not a part of the group.

Close the office unexpectedly an hour or two early on occasion, and send people home to play, to have their own fun.

Try some of these ideas for managing different generations differently, and you may be able to avoid the revolving door syndrome that is very costly in terms of advertising, recruiting, hiring, training and replacing your work force.

Each generation requires a different set of standards to motivate them at work. In order for a company to be truly successful, all generations in the workplace need to understand and value each other, even when their perspectives and goals are vastly different. Management plays a key role in how the different generations interact.

Instead of looking for a quick solution, spend some time getting to know your employees, focusing on their perspectives and goals. Then everyone will be in a better position to minimize the challenges of generational differences, and to capitalize on the strengths the differences can bring.

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